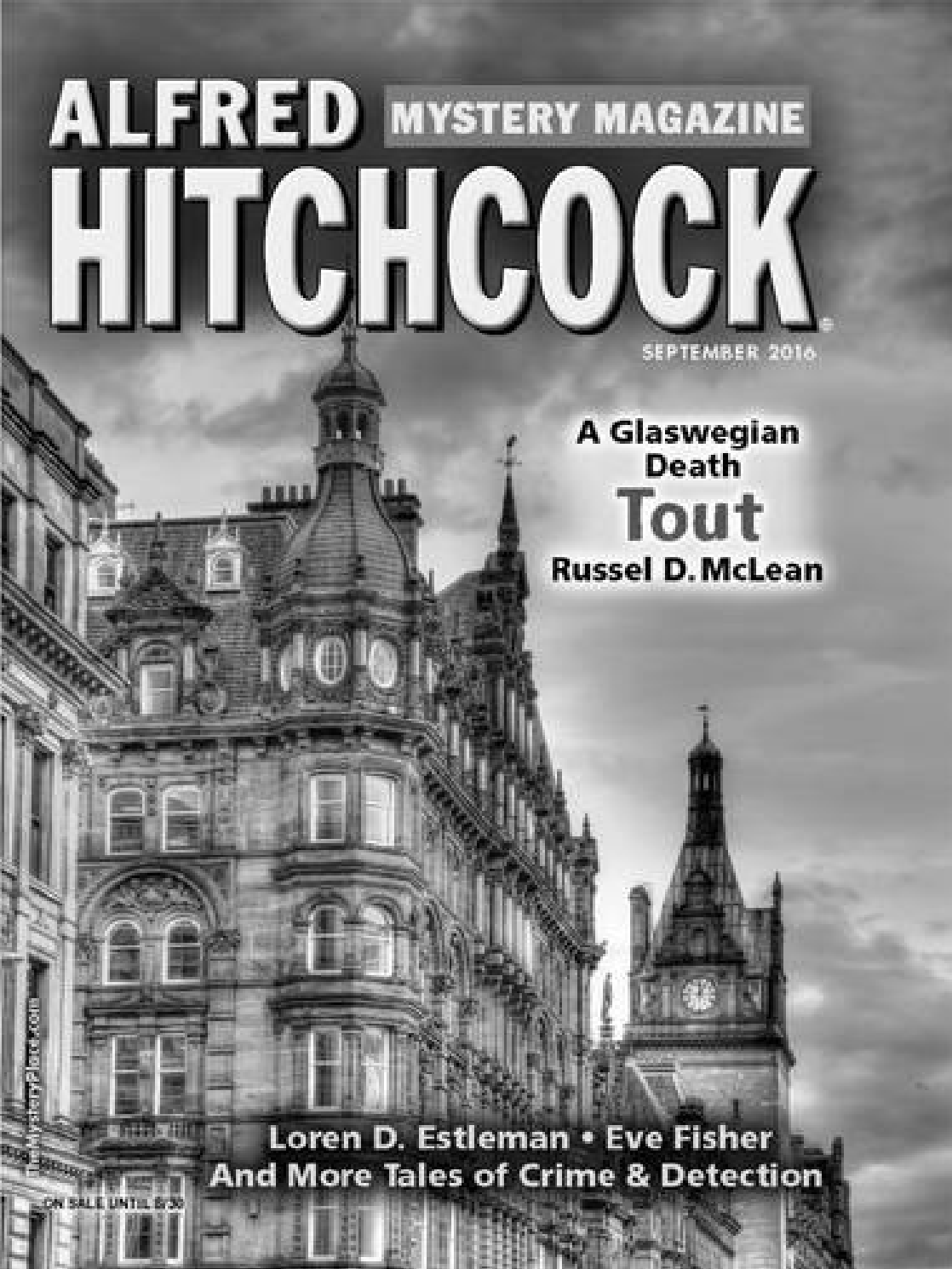


ALFRED HITCHCOCK



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

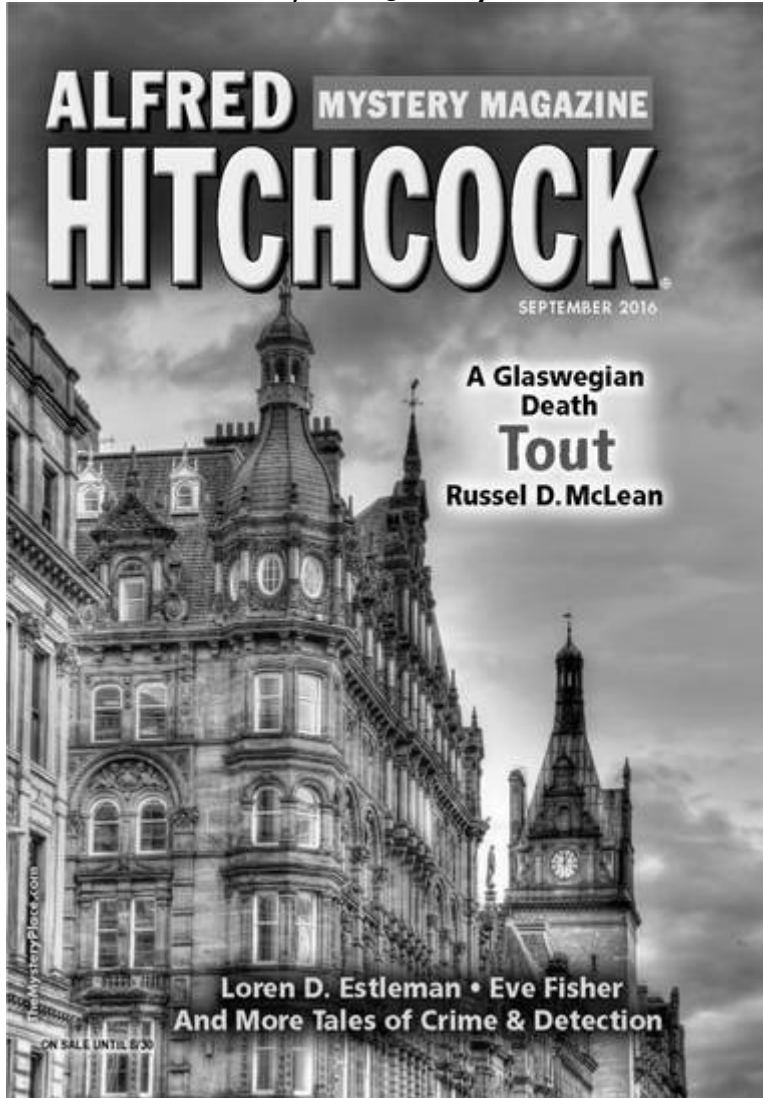
SEPTEMBER 2016

A Glaswegian
Death
Tout
Russel D. McLean

Loren D. Estleman • Eve Fisher
And More Tales of Crime & Detection

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine

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PLAYING THE ACE

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN | 4849 words



Art by AJ Frena

"Evening, Agnes."

"Go to hell."

"Same old Aggie." Lieutenant Max Zagreb stepped outside the elevator and held the door for the long-legged woman in the short skirt and platform heels with a fake alligator bag slung from one bare bony shoulder. She was gaunter than the last time and seemed to have added another stratum of makeup.

He let himself into the room set aside for the Detroit Racket Squad and looked at Detective Burke stretched out on the iron-framed bed in his BVDs and white socks, arms folded behind his head, blowing cigarette smoke at the golden stain on the ceiling.

"You know, if your wife ever hires a private dick, he'll know right where to set up shop. We didn't chip in for this luxury suite to put scalps on your

belt. It's for interrogations the department don't need to know about."

"I was grilling her."

"What I said." He hung his hat on the bedpost and straddled a wooden chair.

"On the level. She's banging a Japanese spy."

"Go on with you. Aggie might betray our valiant war effort, but she don't like teriyaki."

"That's a lie. She'd give Sessue Hayakawa a hand job if he had the yen, but she'd never stoop so low as the enemy, unless she could pass along what he knew."

"She give you anything good?"

Burke grinned baggily.

"I mean something we can use."

"Not yet, but she's seeing him again tomorrow."

"We got enough in the kitty to make her happy?"

"That's the best part. All she wants is I take her dancing in the Oriole. She won a marathon contest in thirty-seven, then grabbed a new partner and hit every floor in Paradise Valley; can't get enough of it."

"You better wear a fake beard. You never know when Asa Organdy might show up with his pet shutterbug." Organdy was a reporter for the *Herald*, a city paper that existed mainly to overturn the present administration.

"Speaking of which." Burke scooped that day's edition from the nightstand and tossed it to his superior.

Organdy's byline on the front page was a rare event since he'd lost his column over various violations of editorial policy, including cashing his paychecks in a west side brothel and filing a false report of a U-boat surfacing in Lake St. Clair. Under the headline HERO OF MONTE CASSINO IN TOWN ran his interview with Bill "Blackie" Modine, a pilot with the Army Air Corps whose squadron had shot down hordes of German fighter planes over the embattled Italian city shortly before D-Day. A file photo of the celebrated ace in his leather helmet and goggles accompanied the piece.

Zagreb folded the paper to the lead column. "He's selling war bonds while on leave. Seems to me we need him over there more than here."

"He'll be back on a troop ship the minute some other flyboy sinks an aircraft carrier or some dogface storms a machine-gun nest. When it comes to pushing that government paper, one hero's worth a dozen Veronica Lakes."

"I wonder why they call 'em nests. You think Krauts lay eggs?"

"Where do you think shell shock comes from?"

Zagreb crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it at him.

"Whatsamatter, Katzenjammer Kids screw up again?" Sergeant Canal entered just as Burke was disentangling himself from the *Herald*. He was the biggest thing in almost every room he occupied, with Burke running a close

second and the others not even in the race.

The lieutenant ignored him. "You see Aggie out front?"

"I missed her. You better not be paying her with gas stamps again," he told Burke. "You remember what happened on Randolph."

"Hell, I don't remember what I done with Aggie." Burke scooped a pint of Old Grand-Dad off the nightstand and swigged.

"We coasted into the middle of a black-market deal on fumes. One more minute and we'd've had to leg it the last hundred yards, lugging Tommies and truncheons."

Zagreb got up and snatched the bottle away. "You can stew your kidneys when you're off the clock. We're waiting for a call from the commish and if whatever it is comes up tonight and you're sozzled, I'll put you on that troop ship myself." He took a pull and twisted the cap back on.

Detective McReary came in wearing too much hat for July. He seldom took it off. He was the junior member of the detail the press called the Four Horsemen and the baldest. He stopped just inside the doorway. "Just once I'd like to step into this room and look at something besides Burksie's hairy legs."

Burke lifted one and pointed his toes. "Aggie says I'd look like Errol Flynn in tights."

"You'd never get 'em on over all that fur." McReary turned to Zagreb. "I just left Thirteen Hundred. We got our marching orders." The Detroit Police Department operated out of 1300 Beaubien Street downtown.

"Mind what I said," the lieutenant told Burke. "Blackjacks, knucks, pistols, or heavy artillery?"

"Blocked hats and pressed suits. It's another babysitting job."

Burke sat up, rubbing his hands. "Betty Grable in town?"

"No such luck. Some Tailspin Tommy come here straight from Eisenhower."

Zagreb picked up the *Herald* and held it up in front of the detective third-grade, stretching out the creases.

"That's him. Buzz or Ack-Ack or one of them other names *Stars and Stripes* dreams up."

"Blackie," Burke said. "From Blackout. Winchell says whenever a Kraut spotter recognizes his Corsair, all Berlin goes dark."

Zagreb was lighting a Chesterfield. He pulled up his lip. "Bull. One fighter looks like all the rest."

"You didn't read the rest of the article. He's got a skeleton painted on his fuselage, wearing a top hat and holding up a bony finger for every plane he's shot down personally. Eight so far."

"Three more and he'll have to take off its shoes and socks."

"Anyway, his kills got him command of a squadron, all with skeletons in silk hats. Twenty-three fingers up, last count."

Canal whistled. "Betty Grable can kiss my rosy—"

"I said her name first," Burke broke in.

"You want me to go out for popcorn, L.T.?"

It was the next morning, and Zagreb was jittery from his tenth cup of ersatz coffee. He looked at McReary's Andy Hardy face, decided he wasn't being ironic, and shook his head. He laid his hand on the ancient battleshipgray projector a civilian volunteer had wheeled into the squad room at 1300. "Anyone know how to work this thing?"

"I'll give it a whirl." Burke, dressed now in the black suit and gray fedora exclusive to the detail, slid off the corner of the desk he'd been sitting on. Most of the desks in the room were vacant, some with swivel chairs upended atop them like tables in a closed saloon, awaiting their masters' return from Europe and the South Pacific.

"You? You can't even change the oil in the Chrysler."

"I can, but oil's blood, Ernie Pyle says. I spent the summer I was in high school sweeping out the booth in the Broadway Capitol and changing reels for the projectionist. He was passed out most of the time."

Looking doubtful, the lieutenant handed him a stack of flat film cans stenciled PROPERTY U.S. ARMY—DO NOT REMOVE FROM BASE. "You break 'em, you answer to Ike."

Burke prised the lid off the first can and threaded the film through the slots and pulleys in the imposing machine, feeding it onto a take-up reel already in place. "Put out that damn buzz-bomb," he told Canal. "No coffin nails, neither. This stuff goes up like the *Hindenburg*."

Canal, half seated on the sill of an open window overlooking Greektown, pressed out his nickel cigar against the frame and flipped the stump at the sidewalk in front of the Pegasus Cafe. "I hope there's a cartoon. That Donald Duck's got balls."

"Then how come Mickey's the one in pants?" McReary seemed genuinely curious.

"Can it. Commish says to take a good look so we'll know Blackie in case he shows up in a zoot suit." Zagreb put his unlit cigarette back into its pack and pocketed it.

McReary cleared the wanted bulletins off the corkboard on the wall and switched off the lights. The projector chattered, throwing moving images onto the curdled surface. Numerals counted down from six to one and suddenly the squad was transported to war-torn Europe.

"Holy crap, it's in color!" said Canal.

McReary, always quick to demonstrate knowledge not in the possession of his seasoned comrades, nodded energetically. "All War Department footage is. So's the stuff the enemy shoots for Hitler and Tojo."

For the next half hour, they watched dozens of planes flying in formation through brilliant blue sky mottled with puffy white clouds, saw bombs

tumbling like spilled cards toward checkerboard targets identified in subtitles as German and Italian industrial cities, witnessed a confident, smiling, athletic-looking young man in helmet and sheep-lined leather jacket waving from the cockpit of a fighter plane, and the same strapping fellow in Class A dress uniform shaking hands with Omar Bradley, Winston Churchill, FDR, and Bob Hope. There was no soundtrack; that would be laid in when the footage was released to the studios in Hollywood for distribution to neighborhood theaters. Propeller-driven aircraft glided as noiselessly as flocks of sparrows, the earth erupted in explosions eerily silent. It was like watching a violent game of charades.

There were hundreds of feet of high-ranking officers in the uniforms of all the Allies hanging ribbons around the pilot's neck and pinning decorations to his tunic.

"Let's hope he don't wear 'em all into combat," Canal said. "If he has to ditch in the Rhine he'll sink square to the bottom."

Burke, standing behind the projector, said, "Probably got crabs in his soup-strainer from being kissed by all them French generals." The air ace cultivated a pencil mustache like Clark Gable's.

Sure enough, his plane wore a decal of a lanky skeleton sporting a top hat and holding up most of its fingers. Canal thought it looked like Buddy Ebsen dancing on screen.

Zagreb unstraddled his chair. "Wrap it up, Burksie. I got a date with Smilin' Jack in person in Witherspoon's office."

The detective stopped the projector and sent the reel spinning in the opposite direction. Captain William J. Modine scrambled backwards into his cockpit and flew his Corsair in reverse off the flight deck of an aircraft carrier.

"Looks like the Italian Air Corps." Canal stripped the cellophane off a fresh cigar.

Police Commissioner John Witherspoon, whose face had been compared to a scrotum with spectacles, greeted the squad boisterously, which was as far from his usual demeanor in the Horsemen's presence as Flash Gordon was from Dearborn; the presence of all four city dailies, fat lollipop microphones with WJR, WWJ, and WXYZ fanned out around their edges in three-dimensional letters, and the Mickey Mouse-shaped magazine of a Pathé newsreel camera was responsible for that, along with the guest of honor. Bill "Blackie" Modine wore a sharp pinstripe suit, a rayon tie with Deco airplanes printed on it, and a faint hourglass of pale skin around his eyes where his goggles had prevented that part of his face from tanning in the sunshine above Germany. His mustache had been trimmed with tweezers and his teeth capped by someone much closer to Hollywood than an army dentist. He was handsome in a pug-nose Irish sort of way and wore his glossy black hair curling slightly over his collar against all military regulations.

Zagreb didn't know if it was because of that, or perhaps his show of humility that had about it an underglow of barely concealed arrogance, but he disliked the man on first sight. It made him feel a little ashamed, given the pilot's record. As outwardly contemptuous as his subordinates about flashy flag waving, he was deeply patriotic, and read and listened to the daily bulletins from both theaters of war with all the ardent anticipation of a *Dick Tracy* fan poring over the latest installment in his adventures in the funny papers.

The war hero interrupted his reveries by seizing his hand in a politician's iron grip and pumping it while flashbulbs popped, pencils scratched, and the movie camera whirred. Witherspoon stood between them, showing his teeth in the gummy grimace he interpreted as a smile.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I'm sure you'll understand if I ask you to withdraw so Captain Modine can rest. You can't shoot down Nazis on too little sleep."

When the three were alone, the commissioner fell back on his bitterpersimmon expression. "Lieutenant, you and your men will make yourselves available to the captain at all times, and keep your eyes open. This city would never recover if a Fifth-Column saboteur made a successful murderous attack on an American hero in our charge."

"Neither would the American hero," said Modine with a grin.

Outside the office, the air ace slapped Zagreb on the back hard enough to jostle loose the Zippo he was applying to a cigarette. "What do you do around here for fun?"

Zagreb stooped and scooped up his lighter. "We got a boatload of picture places, horseracing at the fairgrounds, jazz clubs—"

"Max, is it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Max, I'm not interested in Abbott and Costello or the nags or jitterbugging. I haven't been laid in six weeks."

He answered the aviator's leer with a sickly smile he hoped passed for conspiratorial. "The Rooster Club on Michigan Avenue. No sign, just a stuffed cock pheasant in the window. The girls get checked once a month and we haven't had to raid the joint since Repeal."

Modine slung an arm around his shoulders and steered him down the hall. "I can see you don't read Morse code, so I'll lay it out like Lowell Thomas." He spoke low. His breath smelled of Dentyne. "They put my picture on the cover of *Life*. MGM wants John Garfield to play me in a movie. He's a Jew, so I'm holding out for Tyrone Power. I can't be seen within a city block of a cathouse. I'm staying at the Book Cadillac. See what you can do." He gave his shoulder a smack and they separated.

Zagreb, who had a Jewish grandmother, kept silent. He hadn't liked her much, but he liked Blackie Modine less. And he'd as soon have been saddled with Joseph Goebbels.

"So now we're pimps." Canal ground his teeth on a stogie stuffed with sawdust and DDT. They were in the squad room, bleak as ever with the motion-picture apparatus removed, just the same squashed butts and petrified wads of gum that had been there since before Pearl Harbor. "You tell him to fly his crate into the river?"

"Something of the sort occurred to me, but I told you what the commish said."

Burke struck eight keys simultaneously on the war-weary Underwood he happened to be seated at, jamming the strikers beyond hope of extrication. "I hope to hell the draft board grabs Garfield and they have to use Karloff."

"We aren't going to do it, are we?" McReary pleaded.

"I don't see a way around it."

Canal said, "I never thought I'd say it, but I'd rather be up to my hips in Japanese guerrillas."

"How much we know about this guy?" Burke asked. "I mean, apart from that guff the War Department craps out. He's got to unwind himself from the grand old flag when he hits the shower."

"Forget it," Zagreb said. "Just because a joe wants a tomato in the sack don't mean he's Benedict Arnold."

"I just know we wouldn't be treating Blackie like Sergeant York if he was a lily-white war profiteer we brung in on a Mann rap. We dig and dig till we got something hot and steamy to dump on the city prosecutor's desk."

The lieutenant walked a Chesterfield across his knuckles. "You know, you're not as dumb as you look."

"I got this low forehead from my ma's side. My old man's Tom Edison's bastard son."

"What's the name of that patrolman flew with the Hundred-and-First Airborne?" Zagreb asked Canal. "You played euchre with him and a couple of bimbos before he shipped out. Had him a dame's name: Evelyn?"

"Laverne," the big man said. "Laverne McGill. Verne, if you like your nose where it started. He wrecked three squad cars when he was in training. I lit a candle for our boys the day he made flight school, but he done all right for himself. Shot down three Messerschmitts before he took a slug through his leg. He's back home on desk duty till he can walk straight." Canal scowled. "I don't like you calling them girls bimbos, Zag. Not his, anyway. They're engaged."

"Mea culpa. Find out where she's registered and I'll buy her a Toastmaster. What's his precinct?"

They met McGill in the Olympian Gardens. As Greek food went, the restaurant's bill of fare was only average compared to the Pegasus and the Parthenon in the same block, but as Detroit's best-kept guilty secret the place almost always had a line waiting for tables: It was a payoff spot for

every dirty cop on black-market gangster Frankie Orr's pad. By some divine knowledge, the headwaiter seated the clientele separately, honest public servants in front, their shifty counterparts in back. In this way, relatively straight arrows like Zagreb and his men could tell at a glance the percentage of clean versus dirty at any given time. They were gratified to see that it fell heavily on the side of the angels, but then there was no telling what effect the return of their colleagues from overseas might have on the balance.

McGill sat at a table almost squarely on the dividing line. Combat had a way of making a man stand back and study his options before he decided which way to jump.

He looked like the old Verne, uniform a bit shabby, face deceptively youthful, but since mustering out there was an aged quality to the eyes, and Zagreb couldn't help noting that he'd developed a twitch in his right cheek that made the cigarette in the corner of his mouth jump up from its droop at unexpected intervals.

"Buy you a beer?" He drew back a chair and sat opposite him. The others joined them in order of rank, Canal first, McReary taking up the rear.

"Got one," McGill said. "Lieutenant."

"You eating?"

"Greek food gives me the trots. Lieutenant."

"I hear they gave you the DSC. Good going."

"It's in a drawer somewhere. Lieutenant."

This time he didn't ignore that little hesitation. "Why the attitude, Officer? I'm not the one turned you out for the Dawn Patrol."

The cigarette bobbed. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I'm still looking for my land legs." A rubber-tipped cane leaned against the table at his elbow.

"We won't take up too much of your break. You know Witherspoon tagged us to bathe and burp Bill Modine."

"I heard the scuttlebutt."

"Be a big help if you could tell us a little something about him."

"He's good. Got more guts than you can string on a fence. Shot down five jerries himself before they put him in charge of the squadron. After that it was raining Adolfs all over the European theater."

"We knew that," Canal put in. "We saw the movie."

"I don't know what else I can tell you. We don't all know each other. I never drank with Claire Chennault."

Zagreb said, "I never met J. Edgar Hoover, but I know he's a sawed-off mama's boy. What's the scoop?"

"I'll have that beer. This one's flat."

A thickset waiter with a blue chin nodded when the lieutenant made a circling motion and brought five bottles of Schlitz, three in one hand, two in the other, clamped together at the neck. The Gardens didn't spend much money washing glasses.

McGill tipped up his bottle, put it down half empty, belched. "They only call him Blackie in the press. In the corps it's General Custer, 'cause he's long on grit and short on brains and don't give a hoot in hell how many Yank pilots go down for every Kraut killed."

"They say pretty much the same about Halsey and Patton," McReary said. "Sure it ain't jealousy?"

The former pilot shifted his glare from the detective to Zagreb. "Who's this punk?"

"Mac's okay. How about it?"

"The only thing green in the army is the crummy uniforms. There's no time for it. The Skeleton Squadron's shot down twenty-three Germans and lost twenty of its own."

"The hell you say!" Burke snapped.

"You can look it up in the lists. The joke is Modine puts in for refueling and orders a thousand gallons and ten new pilots. I don't know about you, but I don't think greasing a lousy three more of the enemy wins wars."

Zagreb drank. "He got a death wish or what?"

"Naw, he just don't scare, for himself or anybody else. That ain't courage. Courage is being afraid and going in anyway. Not worrying about your own skin is like being born without arms. Not worrying about anybody else's—your own men's—is like being born without a heart."

McGill lifted his bottle again, then set it down, glanced around the crowded room, and leaned his forearms on the table, dropping his voice. "Last time he went up, he came back with his left wing holier'n lace pants. The Messerschmitts they attacked were on their way back to base. Their tanks was almost dry, so they didn't engage."

"That's why the brass sent him stateside," he added. "Once is a mistake, maybe. Twice—and a dead Blackie, shot down by one of his wing men— and they'll smell the stink clear to Berlin."

"You're saying what?" McReary's voice was even quieter, as if he didn't want him to hear the question.

"I'm saying what kind of commander gets shot at by one of his own?"

They reconvened in their room at the California Hotel. This was one of those conversations best not overheard.

"I don't see it's our affair." Burke was stretched out on the bed once again. "Our boys are going to keep getting killed till we wrap this thing up. It ain't touch football."

McReary said, "It's everybody's affair. That's why we donate aluminum coffeepots and sit still for rationing. You never heard of the home front?"

Canal opened a window; a majority-mandated prerequisite before putting flame to one of his El Ropos. "Maybe them sausage-eaters'll take care of it for us. No insurance company would go near a guy that's all balls and no

head."

"Question is how many of our guys he takes with him," Zagreb said. "Also, what if somebody in his outfit takes another crack at him and don't miss? You want to tune in to Axis Sally and hear what she does with that?"

McReary uncovered his scantily covered scalp and used his hat to fan away cigar fumes. "We could write to the War Department, get him behind a desk and away from the stick."

Canal blew a plume straight at him. "That's a one-way ticket to a tour in the Aleutians, where we can tell the story to any polar bear that listens. When Washington says 'Loose lips sink ships,' they mean theirs."

Zagreb glanced at his Wittnauer. "We're sharing the stage with him in the Fisher in an hour and a half, applauding when he swaps stories from *Warriors With Wings* for war bond pledges. Maybe one of us can sort of nudge him off the edge and he'll fall and break his neck. A leg or an arm wouldn't do it. They'd slap a splint on him and send him right back into the show."

"I can always fall on top of him and make sure," Canal offered. "That's one grenade I wouldn't mind throwing myself on."

"I got a better idea." Burke reached over from the bed and pulled his little black book out of the drawer in the nightstand.

The Fisher Theater stage was decked in red-white-and-blue bunting, with a banner behind a podium showing a fierce eagle with Air Corps insignia on its wings diving talons-first at a terrified Adolf Hitler, and the legend INVEST IN VICTORY: BUY WAR BONDS in star-spangled letters. Modine, resplendent in his dress uniform, its breast plastered with fruit salad and the French *Croix du Guerre* on a ribbon around his neck, shook Mayor Jeffries's hand and held the key to the city, an oversize hunk of gilded wood, above his head in both hands like Joe Louis hoisting the championship belt. The backdrop of the Four Horsemen in nondescript black suits brought the gallant soldier into dazzling relief.

There followed a speech by His Honor, an appearance by a wheelchairbound Spanish-American War veteran representing the local chapter of the American Legion, and the guest of honor, reading an appeal from a prepared script to "dig deep, and dig our boys out of harm's way." He seasoned his pitch with an eyewitness account of the fighting "straight from the front." (Canal said later he'd watched a similar scene in a Richard Dix film.) The audience sprang from its seats, palms pounding, almost before he finished. The racket was still going on when he twisted his body and cupped his hands around his mouth to speak into Zagreb's ear: "You got the pump primed?" This time the Dentyne on his breath competed with bourbon.

The lieutenant nodded grimly and held out his palm. Modine dropped the key to his room onto it, shielding the action with his body. Then he stuffed a

fold of bills into Zagreb's handkerchief pocket. "Good champagne; not any of that wartime swill. And those big fat strawberries they sell in the Eastern Market."

Zagreb nodded again, figuring the logistics. Mentioning that the market didn't open till morning seemed pointless.

The Racket Squad formed a flying wedge to escort the captain down the packed aisle and out of the building. As they bundled him into the beetleshaped Chrysler, Zagreb handed the room key to Burke, who whistled for a cab as Canal took Burke's usual place behind the wheel and made all the adjustments necessary for a man his size.

As prearranged, the three remaining Horsemen conducted the war hero to the Roma Café for spaghetti by the bushel and Chianti by the bucket. Frankie Orr, a silent partner in the enterprise, recognized the party from his customary booth and sent a bottle of ninety-year-old brandy to their table. Zagreb accepted it, acknowledging the host's generosity by pointing his finger at him and flicking his thumb in an unmistakable gesture. It was an armed truce.

The squad contented itself with a beer apiece, watching their responsibility plunge deeper into drunkenness with each round. When a middleaged waitress passed too near the table on the way to another station, he caught her by her apron strings, spun her off her feet into his lap, and tried to kiss her. Orr snapped his fingers at one of the broad-shouldered men in off-the-rack suits looming in the shadows and pointed at Modine. Zagreb rose swiftly to take charge, but Canal was ahead of him, untangling the woman from the aviator's clutches while McReary distracted him by offering him a cigarette. The detective third-grade didn't smoke, but made it a point to carry Zagreb's brand in case the lieutenant ran out. He picked up the candle in its pink-tinted bowl from the center of the table and held it while the flyer lit up, by which time the waitress was well out of range. The brute bodyguard retreated into the gloom.

"Who stole my girl?" It came out more like, *hoostulmg!*? He pounded the table. "Another round!"

Zagreb leaned in close enough to say something the rest of the room wouldn't catch. Modine's trademark victory grin split his face in half. He scrambled to his feet, jostling the table, knocking over glasses and bottles and upsetting the candle, which McReary scooped up before it could set fire to the brandy-soaked tablecloth.

Burke was waiting outside the door of Blackie Modine's hotel room. Modine fumbled in his pockets. Burke, saying nothing, twisted the knob and opened the door, which had been unlocked by the woman now in possession of the key. Still beaming, the pilot slapped the detective's beefy shoulder and staggered inside, fumbling the door shut behind him. "Who'd Aggie get?"

Zagreb asked Burke.

"Roxanne. Works the six hundred block of Livernois."

Canal said, "Poxy Roxy? She's got a coffee mug with her name on it at the free clinic. Ain't that a little too on the nose?"

"She cleans up swell; to the eye, I mean. Zag, it cost me a C-note to get Aggie to set it up. It gets out she put Roxy back in business till the penicillin kicks in, every cathouse door in town'll be closed to her. The local trade's got a reputation to maintain."

Zagreb winced, then shrugged. "Pony up, fellas. Twenty-five a head."

Canal pulled out his trouser pockets. "You'll have to carry me till payday. Cossack King ran dead last at the fairgrounds."

"Serves your old man right for being born in the Ukraine." Zagreb looked at McReary.

The young man peeled two tens and five singles out of a leatherette wallet and gave them to Burke. "You can break the news to Ma. Her impacted molar has to wait till next month."

"Stop griping," Zagreb said. "Verne McGill says all pilots have to pass a physical before they return to active duty. With luck, a good dose of Casanova's Complaint will keep Blackie stateside till the German General Staff gets wise and slips Hitler a permanent Mickey Finn. It's cheap at twice the price: At a buck apiece, a hundred of our boys come home safe to a victory parade."

"Better'n buying war bonds." Burke took a flat pint of Four Roses from his hip pocket and unscrewed the cap. "Here's to V-E Day."

THE FROZEN FISKE

BRIAN COX | 3589 words

When they were of an age when any future still seems possible, Alan and Gene talked of moving to the Yukon. The romance of vast wilderness enticed them away from the confines of concrete, out of the reach of frustrated fathers and distracted mothers, and into a world of Kodiak bears, snowshoes, dogsleds, salmon runs, and perilous mountain ranges. The boys collected topographical maps of Alaska and made lists of necessary equipment and sketched plans while walking to school or while wandering patches of woods that spackled the county.

Alan said they could pan for gold, and they practiced for hours some days in a shallow bend of the Fiske River using pie pans sneaked from home.

One winter afternoon when they were thirteen, they stood on the bank of the Fiske under the Pershing Parkway overpass. Traffic rushed above them with a rhythmic thump and thrum. The sky was low, the clouds a thick swollen gray smoke. A new layer of snow stretched a hundred yards across the river, untouched but for a few small animal and bird tracks. The river ran on away from the two friends, east and west like a wide white ribbon.

A sense of isolation held Alan and Gene silent as they considered the river.

Wanna cross? asked Alan after a bit.

Sure, said Gene, unsure. Is it frozen?

It should be.

What if it's not?

Alan laughed. That would suck, he said.

Hold on to me, said Gene as he extended a foot out onto the snowcovered ice. Alan took his friend's hand and sought secure footing.

You got me?

I got you.

Don't let go, man.

I won't.

I'm serious.

I won't.

Gene poked his boot through the snow, probing until he felt ice then shifting his weight to test the ice's strength. He listened for the first creak of cracking. He transferred his full weight onto the ice.

I think it's okay, he said.

The two boys moved out onto the river. They walked as if not to stir a sleeping baby, each foot pushed ahead so their balance was never fully

committed forward. Gene counted each step.

If you fall in, put your arms straight out, he told Alan.

That's for quicksand, said Alan.

Same idea, said Gene.

A hundred deliberate paces brought them to the middle of the river.

The point of no return, said Alan.

The wind whirled around them. Snow dust sprayed their bare faces and spiraled up into the steel supports of the overpass. Whenever the ice made a sound like a board splintering, they tensed still and waited for the shiver to pass before taking another step, and then, while being careful not to break their concentration or disturb their balance, they would release a short laugh as if they had been foolish to be terrified that the ice might betray them by giving way. If either boy had been alone, he would have turned back long before. They continued on only because neither could bear the shame of acknowledging fear before the other.

When they were within twenty yards of the far shore, the temptation to bolt for the bank was powerful, but they resisted, holding to the cautious cadence that had served them well so far. At last, they were over and threw themselves onto snow-covered ground, their legs jittery with released tension. They rolled over on their backs and howled.

We could have *died*, crowed Gene with delight.

Alan's phone call three hours before dawn was the first time Gene had heard from his childhood friend in six years. He knew Alan had moved back north months before from Florida where he had lived for a decade with one friend or distant relative after another, working as a telemarketer and chasing a percentage as an ineffective promoter of nascent, talentless bands and as a gullible middleman trying to negotiate multimillion-dollar deals for defunct gold mines or dry oil fields. Whenever he and Gene talked every few months, a promising deal with a record label or foreign investment company had always just fallen through and Gene would wire Alan money to help him meet rent or pay a utility. In time, Gene stopped taking his calls.

After high school, Gene had lucked into a job with the printer where his uncle was a pressman. Alan tried to talk him out of it.

What about Alaska? Alan asked.

Come on, dude, be serious. We're not going to Alaska.

That's what we always talked about.

We were kids.

Gene started out working the overnight shift as a floor boy and then became a pressman and over the years rose to operations manager. He married and had two daughters and a chocolate lab and a tri-level with a walk-out patio. He mowed the lawn in sandals on summer Saturdays and had date nights with his wife and picked the kids up from swim or soccer

practice. He'd purchased ten wooded acres that bordered the Fiske along the north edge of the county with the plan of building there in a few years and on random Sundays walked the property with his wife to consider possible views.

In those years of progressive stability for Gene, Alan worked as a bank teller, a cab driver, a campus security guard, drove an ice cream truck, packed orders for a book distributor, and washed trucks, all while pursuing the one big deal with a percentage that would make him rich overnight. There were stretches of time between jobs when he didn't have a car, and at least once when he did have a car that he was living out of its backseat. Gene eventually heard Alan's parents had stopped giving him money and finally had changed the locks to prevent him from sneaking in some nights to crash in their basement.

Friends occasionally wondered if Alan had a drug habit or was maybe mentally ill, but Gene always said he didn't think so. It was just Alan's impatience with incremental progress; he was always angling to skip traditional steps to success in order to secure wealth with one great swing, and he associated with people equally dysfunctional who fed his delusion that dramatic good fortune was imminent.

When Alan and Gene met for drinks or a ballgame, they increasingly had less to talk about in the present and their conversation would drift to the past, to weekend wanderings and afternoon adventures in the woods and, inevitably, to crossing the frozen Fiske.

Once, Alan mentioned he was looking for a different place to live. His roommate was a methhead, he said, and was trying to cook the stuff in their kitchen. Alan was sure the guy was going to blow the place up. He needed to get out. Gene understood what his friend was hoping. He had wondered before at odd times that if he had somehow kept Alan closer after high school perhaps he wouldn't have wound up so misguided and itinerant. But it was too late for that now. Gene couldn't have Alan live in his home, not with his wife and children there, not even for a short span because Gene knew better than to believe Alan would ever decide to leave on his own. He would stay until Gene was forced to make him get out. So he suggested Alan call a social services agency and paid for the next round of beers.

Later that night, Gene said, Man, you've got to get things together. Quit chasing pipe dreams. We're almost forty, for Chrissake. Live life in *order*.

Not long after that, Alan left for Florida. The distance between the two friends became geographical as well.

When Alan phoned early that morning, Gene sat up in bed next to his wife.

Alan? he asked in a fog. What's wrong?

I'm sorry, buddy, but I got no one else to call.

The streets winding back around to the complex were silent in the

predawn. Headlights flashed past from cars traveling the interstate that marked the eastern border of the clump of one-level attached condos. From over a shabby hedgerow freckled with snagged fast-food bags that fluttered in the breeze, the red neon sign of a liquor store created a glaring luminescence in the cracked parking lot where Gene waited in his Ford pickup for Alan to appear.

Gene jolted at a rap on the window. A woman wearing a drab purple halter-top and cutoffs smiled at him with lips painted the color of a pomegranate seed. Her lusterless hair was piled atop her head, and her face was coated in thick layers of foundation.

You looking for a date? she asked through the window.

Gene shook his head. Just waiting for a friend, he said.

Honey, I'll be your friend.

That's okay, he said, waving. Thanks.

With a pout she turned away, and Gene checked the door locks.

Through the hedge, a skinny old man stumbled, hefting two plastic grocery bags. In the red glow from the liquor sign, Gene could see the man was shirtless, his weak chest caved and his bony shoulders slumped from the weight he struggled to carry. He weaved across the lot, stopped once to adjust his grip, and then continued down the sidewalk and out of sight.

A door opened in the condo across from Gene, and Alan stepped out, hauling two collapsing cardboard boxes and a laundry bag. Gene got out to help Alan put his belongings in the truck bed.

Thanks for coming to get me, said Alan.

Let's just go, said Gene.

What happened, said Alan, slamming the dashboard with an open hand, was the moron hooked up with a street whore who just wanted his disability check and she told the guy she didn't trust me and that night she and me got into it.

Look, said Alan.

He showed Gene where the bitch had scratched him on his cheek. Then the old jackass had started waving around a goddamn gun and ordered Alan to get out.

Why are you having anything to do with these people? asked Gene.

It wasn't clear to him where Alan had met the guy who owned the condo or how he'd arranged to move in with him. Alan said he was an old disabled vet and an alcoholic, living off disability and Social Security. Alan had helped him manage his money, shopped for groceries, cleaned and cooked, and kept track of his medications in exchange for a small bedroom.

She's not going to do all that, he said. The jackass.

Alan pressed his hand to his forehead. He didn't know what he was going to do or where he was going to go. He'd gotten a job on the floor of an

aluminum fabrication plant, but that didn't start until the coming week and he had no cash until then.

Gene drove to a cheap motel and paid for two nights.

I'll get it back to you, said Alan, the boxes and laundry bag at his feet.

Don't worry about it, said Gene, nodding good-bye to the apathetic attendant behind the double-plate glass window. That's what friends are for, right?

Gene wondered about that later, driving home. Was that what friends were for? He wasn't sure he'd done enough. He imagined Alan ending up homeless in another five or ten years, out of options and opportunity, wandering city streets the way they had wandered woods when they were kids. It was a very real future for his friend, Gene was sure, and he wondered about the degree of his obligation.

Gene checked up on Alan the next day after work, taking him spare bedding, groceries, some not-cheap beer. And though Alan said he was all set, he accepted it. He ranted more about the old man who'd kicked him out of the condo. Gene was reminded of the time when they were fifteen and were arrested for shoplifting because Alan had tried to sneak out of a convenience store with a six-pack of Stroh's under his coat. Alan berated the clerk for insisting with a gun barrel that they wait for the police even after Alan had handed back the beer. He blamed the clerk for their arrest. Even now when they recalled the incident as one more youthful adventure, Alan would raise his voice in accusatory outrage.

He treated us like criminals, he'd shout, and Gene would shake his head and roll his eyes.

Right, right, Gene'd say. Nothing's ever your fault.

That was not my fault. That clerk was an asshole.

In the motel room, Alan handed Gene one of the beers and with a grimace said he had a big favor to ask. He needed Gene to drive him back to the condo. He'd forgotten a manila envelope that had all his personal papers like his birth certificate and Social Security card, that sort of thing, and he needed to retrieve it. Gene groaned, but then it got worse. Alan thought it would be best to go after midnight because the old man and the whore would be gone by then for at least several hours. He knew where the old man kept a key to the condo, hidden by the complex Dumpster.

Jesus, Alan.

I know, I know. I wouldn't ask except I really need that stuff.

Gene drank the beer, staring down at dirty clothes clumped beside the bed, trying to decide what he should do. This is how it would be, he recognized—what he had feared for a long time. Having Alan in his life would be helping him work out of one screwup after another, one bad decision after another, one impulsive act after another. But Gene's cynicism was followed by another thought he'd carried for years about the onus of friendship:

Maybe if he'd worked harder to keep Alan closer, influenced him more, every now and then given him gentle guidance, maybe the screwups and bad decisions and impulsive acts wouldn't have been so recurring. Maybe now was the chance to redeem that failure. Maybe even still he could move Alan toward a more favored future. Why not? It was possible, wasn't it?

All right, Gene said, finishing the beer in a final draft. But then you need to be done with these people, man. I'm telling you, they are bad news.

The "U" in the red liquor sign was dark. Only two of the parking lot lights worked, creating cones of a weak yellow haze on the cracked sidewalk. Gene had parked his truck in the black shadows on the far side of the Dumpster. Alan had said he'd be two minutes. It'd been six. Gene tapped the steering wheel with a finger and tried to stop thinking he'd made a mistake.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he muttered, tapping.

Another minute ticked over on the digital dashboard clock when from around the corner an older man Gene did not recognize appeared and made his way to the condo door Alan had closed behind him minutes earlier. He walked with a limp and twice laughed into the air and shook his head as if he'd heard something funny. Gene stopped tapping as the man drew a key from his pocket to open the door and entered the condo. The door closed, a light turned on, and Gene waited, his tapping finger poised over the steering wheel.

A muffled shout and then a banging came out of the condo and across the darkness. There was more yelling and then Gene saw the door open and Alan, clutching a brown satchel, was trying to grapple his escape from the old man, who succeeded in pulling Alan by his hair back into the condo.

Gene! shouted Alan before he disappeared from the doorway.

Gene waited, expecting Alan to make the door again and break for the truck, but when it had been too long and he hadn't appeared, Gene smacked the steering wheel.

Damnit, he said before getting out of the truck and running across the lot to the condo. From the door he could hear the two men fighting in back, shoving into walls and knocking into furniture. The room smelled of cigarette smoke and fried food and warm beer. Gene called Alan's name as he moved to the sound of the fighting. He came upon them in a small bedroom, tussling over the satchel. When the old man saw Gene, he let go the bag and reached under a pillow and withdrew a gun.

Jesus, shouted Alan, and Gene yelled Hey! as he jumped without thinking to maybe grab the gun and there was a sharp pop that hurt Gene's ears and he fell with the man on the bed and wrestled and smelled stagnant whiskey on the old man's hot breath and felt the hard gun against his own ribs and he got his hand on it and wrenched it back just before there was another

close pop and the old man's resistance vanished the way a light blinks off and Gene collapsed on top of him, breathing hard and wild, and at the same time an enraged mad howl erupted from somewhere behind him and Gene rolled over and in a spasm of panic and fear fired a wild shot and a woman with thick red lipstick and her hair piled atop her head fell over in the doorway, her head smacking a half-open dresser drawer before hitting the floor.

Gene got off the bed, tense and twitching for the next attack, but the room was quiet enough he could hear the crackle of the mattress as it recovered from his weight. The old man didn't move or make a sound where he was curled on the bed as if he were spooning a spirit. The woman's mouth was fixed in a red-stained sneer, her eyes staring without purpose. Gene tried to think but he could only bend over to retch. When the nausea passed, he stepped out of the room and saw Alan hunched on the floor in the hallway, the leather satchel held loosely in his lap.

Alan, come on, Gene said, reaching down for his friend. We gotta go.

Alan's head bobbed up and then rolled to the side as if he were dozing on a train. He coughed and mumbled.

What? said Gene, still hearing echos. Come on. We gotta go.

He leaned over, put an arm around Alan's waist, and lifted him to his feet. We gotta go.

Gene drove, his mind flashing with nearly incomprehensible images and chaotic speculation. Had anyone seen them? He didn't think so. Crap, he still had the gun. Maybe that was good. The parking lot was still empty when they crossed to the truck. How could no one have seen them? Someone probably saw the truck, wrote the license plate down. Should he get rid of the truck? Where? How would he get to work? God, the way her upper lip was pulled back. They'd find his fingerprints. His DNA. Oh, crap, his DNA! He should call the cops. He couldn't. He needed to think. He needed to *think*. *Think*.

He'd already passed the hospital's entrance to the emergency room once. It hadn't been until they were getting in the truck that he understood Alan had been shot, though he wasn't sure where. Blood saturated the bottom of Alan's shirt. Gene, too, had blood on his shirt and pants and on his hands. Smears of blood were on the steering wheel and door handles and dashboard.

Christ, Alan, Gene said. Oh, Jesus.

I messed up, Alan said, slumping against the passenger door, his hands limp and open on his thighs.

You're shot.

I messed up.

Alan hadn't spoken since. His faint breathing was flecked with fluid. He

coughed for a bit and then stopped. Gene called his name, shook his shoulder, but he didn't respond.

Gene had driven straight to the hospital but as the ER entrance approached he was overcome with a sense that he wasn't ready and he drove on. He didn't know yet what to say. How had this happened? How? This wasn't him. How would he explain this to his wife? The police would arrest him for murder, for Chrissake. This wasn't *him*. He slapped the steering wheel and rocked as he tried to still his mind. He exhaled, struggling to play out scenarios of possible courses of action. Every consequence was the devastation of everything he'd built in his life.

Goddamn you, he yelled at Alan. I was just trying to help.

He looked at his friend, the way his shoulders limply shook with each jar from the road.

Alan?

There was no breathing. Gene waited, but there was no breathing.

Alan?

He yanked his shoulder. Alan?

He turned off his headlights and took the dirt access road. Light from the high moon filtered down through the trees, weak but sufficient, as if rays from a failing flashlight. He drove deeper onto the property where he'd planned to build a home someday, headed the truck toward the Fiske. His mind was finally at rest. He still had not devised a plan but at least his thoughts had settled.

When he broke out of the stand of woods he angled off the road and across a field of Indian grass. He stopped when he neared the riverbank and got out. He breathed deeply once and could smell churned earth and the river's tang. The treeline was bright and defined in the moonlight. He eased Alan's body from the cab of the truck and carried him, staggering with the weight, to the river's edge. He laid Alan down on the bank and sat beside him, a hand on Alan's shoulder. He sat there with his eyes closed and his head tilted back for a bit and then he removed his shoes and socks and waded into the rushing Fiske and cupped his hands and brought cold river water to his face. He scrubbed the dried blood from his hands and dunked his head to flush out the fog.

He knew what he needed to do, but for a while longer at least he would just stay there with the river rushing past him, carrying everything away.

FIRST, DIG TWO GRAVES

WENDY LEEDS | 2712 words

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION/INITIAL INTAKE CLIENT NAME: Phyllis Claire d'Angelino

AGE: 22

OCCUPATION: waitress

REFERRED BY: Mendelson & Orbach Law Group, PC

PRESENTING ISSUE/S: Official inquiry into disappearance/murder of husband, Duane d'Angelino

DATE: Friday, August 7

TIME: 4:00PM

I filled in the usual blanks on the intake form. Then I peered over my wire-rimmed glasses at the young woman slouched in the corner of my couch. She'd arrived late, appeared fully oriented but seemed sullen and angry. Her dark hair spiked out around her head like thorns, and she had a row of piercings along the lobe of her left ear. She was wearing a lime T-shirt with a missing sleeve, and cutoffs that looked like they belonged to an older brother. I could smell the secondhand smoke from where I sat.

"Would you like to be called Phyllis?" I asked as I printed her name on the top of a clean page in my notebook.

"Hell no." She snorted. "Everyone calls me Angel." She smirked at the irony, and I made a note of it.

"So, why are you here?" I asked.

"My lawyer said you're a freaking genius at keeping girls like me out of jail." Angel thrust her legs out in front of her, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at me. "Just so you know, they made me come. I don't believe in any of this psychological crap."

"Mmm." I settled back in my leather armchair and glanced at the small clock ticking away on the table to my right. *Only an hour to the end of the week and then the peace and freedom of the ocean lay in wait for me. Just this one last client to protect.*

I looked back at Angel, who was still glaring at me. "Tell me why you're here, Angel. And let me remind you that everything you say in this room is confidential."

"Yeah, right." Angel hoisted herself out of the sofa and paced the perimeter of the room. She stopped beside my desk to pick up the framed snapshot of Victor I kept there. "I see you got a man." She showed me the picture. "What's he like?"

I looked down at my notes to hide the unexpected emotion that welled up in me. "He's dead," I said.

"You miss him?" She put the picture back.

"Sometimes." *All the time. Never.* There weren't words to describe the way it felt to wake in the middle of the night sweating and shaking as I relived the hour of his death. There weren't words to describe the emotions of loss and sorrow and regret that haunted my every breath.

"You got anyone to replace him?" she asked.

I refocused my attention on my client. "Do you have anyone to replace Duane?"

She snorted again. "Like he's worth replacing."

"Tell me more about how you feel about your husband."

"He's a piece of crap," she said. "I married him to get out of my father's house. I stayed with him because I got no place else to go." She dug a package of red licorice out of her pocket and ripped off the end of a stick with her side molars.

"Tell me about your father."

"He was a piece of crap."

"What about your mother?"

"She was useless."

"What do you mean?"

"She let my father hit her. She let him beat her—and worse. She wasn't small or helpless. She could've stopped it whenever she wanted, but she just took it." Angel gnawed off another chunk of licorice and chewed hard.

"Did your father hit you?"

Angel stopped chewing and turned to look out the window. "He hit me—and worse—until I was ten." When she turned to look at me, I saw a cool, hard intelligence in her gray eyes that lifted the fine hairs at the back of my neck.

"What happened when you were ten?"

"When I was ten, I hit him in the face with a baseball bat. I hit him so hard I broke his cheek. What do you think about that, doc?"

"What do *you* think about that, Angel?"

"I think it means the old turd never hit me again. And I don't take crap from anyone, no matter how big or how mean."

"Did you take crap from Duane?"

"Do you mean did I hit him with a baseball bat?"

"Did you?"

"Would you let someone hit you, doc?" She took another chew of licorice.

"There are ways to deal with violence that don't involve a baseball bat, Angel," I said mildly.

She snickered. "Is that what they teach you in shrink school, that you can *talk* your way out of getting used as someone's punching bag?"

"What I think isn't the issue here." I glanced past her at the late afternoon sun and thought longingly of the smell of salt and the feel of the cool ocean breeze on my face. I thought of how peaceful and free I'll feel out on the water, of how long I'd been planning and looking forward to escaping the long hours of work and the sleepless nights. *It won't be long now, I comforted myself. Just this one last client.*

"Tell me what happened to Duane."

"How would I know?" She tossed the rest of her licorice in the trash.

"Do you think he's dead?"

She shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"The police found a spatter of your husband's blood on the wall in your living room."

"So?"

"I'm sure your lawyer told you that if you hit him in self-defense, I'll put that in my report, and the law will take that into consideration."

"You think that'll make a difference?"

"I know it will." I smiled ruefully. "Like your lawyer said, 'I'm a freaking genius at keeping battered women out of jail.'"

Angel turned her back on me and continued her tour of the room, pausing to read the titles on the spines of the books neatly arranged in the bookshelf behind my desk. She studied my diplomas as if interested, then stopped at the collection of pictures I'd taken of Victor one afternoon on our —my boat, *Liberty*.

She took a picture down off the wall and studied it awhile. Then she looked at me, like she was having a hard time matching me to the smiling, handsome man in the picture.

"He looks... *younger* than you," she said, choosing the word carefully.

"He was."

"How'd he die?" she asked.

"He drowned." I pressed my palm hard against my left thigh, kneading the muscle there until it hurt. Then I focused on *that* pain instead of the pain flooding my heart. "But we're here to talk about *your* husband," I said, forcing the conversation back on track.

"I've always liked the water myself." Angel hung the picture back on the wall. "When I was young, we'd go to my grandfather's house in Maine every summer. He had a lobster boat, and sometimes he let me help pull his traps." Her shoulders softened and she let out a long breath. "I always felt so free on the water, like nothing could hurt me there. You know?" She looked around at me to see if I was listening.

"I know." I nodded. "Is that why you rented the *Boston Whaler* the day after your husband disappeared?" I asked.

Angel smiled as if I'd said something funny. "I've always thought the best way to get rid of a body would be to weight it down with a big rock and then

drop it in the middle of the ocean. Nobody will ever find it there."

"Is that what you did, Angel?"

"If I did, why would I tell you?" She returned to the sofa, readjusted the cushions, and sank back down.

"Because I know something about what you're going through, Angel, and I can make it easier for you."

She thought about that a moment, then asked, "You ever think how many ways there are to get rid of a dead guy?"

"How many?"

She counted on her fingers. "You could roast him in a pit in the ground like a pig at a luau and eat him. Or you could grind him in a wood chipper, or hack him apart with a chain saw and put out his parts for the dogs to eat, or take him into the country, smear his naked butt with honey, tie him to a tree, and let bears eat through his soft skin into the soft jelly in his gut."

"It sounds like you've thought a lot about this."

She leaned forward and said softly, "I have thought of nothing else for the last four years."

"Do you think your husband is dead?"

She ran her hand through the spikes in her hair and grinned at me with a rage so ferocious it made me lean back in my chair. "Yes, I think he's very dead."

"What did you do, Angel?"

"What would you do if you hated your husband so hard it made your head want to explode?" She rocked forward on the sofa, moaning like an injured animal.

I made a brief note and waited.

After a while, Angel stopped rocking. With a soft sob she sank back into the sofa and closed her eyes.

"Angel?" I prompted softly.

In answer, she curled forward, her forehead resting in her hands.

"Angel?" I whispered.

"It was like I was dreaming. But I knew I was awake and it was real," she said at last, her voice so faint I had to lean in to hear her as she continued.

"Duane'd been out Saturday night drinking with his buddies and came home staggering and stinking drunk, like always. When I asked him where he'd been, he slammed me up against the bedroom wall. The back of my head hit so hard it took me a minute to catch my breath and get my feet under me, but when I did, I twisted free.

"I started for the front door, but Duane was only a step behind me, so I headed for the big closet in the hall. It used to be a bathroom, and it still locks from the inside. I jerked the door open and was halfway inside when he grabbed my left arm. He yanked it so hard he nearly tore it off.

Angel slowly uncurled and began massaging the outside of her thighs as

she spoke. "But this time was different. I'd left his old baseball bat in there, just in case." She stopped.

"Then what happened, Angel?" I prompted gently.

She shook her head as she spoke. "He was screaming I better say my prayers because I was as good as dead." She closed her eyes tight and held up her right hand as if she was still holding the bat. "So, I closed my eyes and swung as hard as I could."

She swung her hand to show me. "When the wood hit his head it made this terrible crushing sound, and I could feel his skull shatter." She shuddered and sucked air in through her teeth.

I felt the bile rise in my own stomach and I had to swallow to keep my lunch down. *What a terrible way to commit murder—so personal, so bloody,* I thought. *Better to plan out an impersonal death in advance, one that looks like an accident. It's much better in the long run to think things through beforehand. There aren't so many legal troubles and the memories aren't so... or maybe not.* I shivered involuntarily and reached for a tissue to cover my reaction.

To my relief, Angel seemed too wrapped up in recalling the details of her husband's death to notice the way my hand shook as I dabbed at my nose.

"He screamed and staggered, but didn't fall down right away, so I clobbered him again. I kept whacking him until he stopped moaning or moving. Then I hit him some more to be sure he was dead. There was blood everywhere. It took me all night to clean things up.

"Who knew there was so much blood in a body? Who knew how it could spurt and ooze out over everything and how hard it is to get out of your hair and your clothes and the rug and the chairs."

She rubbed her hands together as if still trying to get them clean. "After that, I wrapped him in the shower curtain, and tucked in the ends nice and neat so the blood wouldn't leak out. Then I dragged him down to the garage, stuffed him into the trunk of my Chevy, then went back to clean up the mess.

"The next day, I drove to the marina and rented the *Boston Whaler*. I found a couple of cement blocks near an abandoned warehouse and hid them in the bottom of the boat under my old raincoat. Then I went to a local bar, had a couple of beers, and waited until it was dark.

"When it looked like everyone had gone for the day, I pulled Duane out of the Chevy and dragged him down the dock. I shoved him into the bottom of the boat and headed out into the bay. When I got out so far that I couldn't see land anywhere, I tied him to the cement blocks, shoved him over the edge into the water, and down he went."

It's eerie how silently a man slips under the water after only a few minutes of struggling and screaming for help. It's unnerving to hear your name screamed with such fear and rage. I could still hear Victor's screams

in my dreams.

It was surprisingly easy to get rid of that selfish, young, womanizing bastard who was perfectly willing to let me buy him a Rolex and a Mercedes but refused to keep his hands off my clients and my friends. Death was too good for a man who thought he could win an argument by slapping me around— and worse.

I clenched my jaw together so hard my whole body shook.

Victor, if I could watch you struggle for your life over and over again, if I could hear you scream for help a thousand times more, it would never be enough.

You got what you deserved, and I got to watch.

I was filled with the usual flood of satisfaction at the memory, followed by a surge of suffocating pain as I relived my last glimpse of what had been my husband.

As I'd watched Victor sink down into the ocean, to be eaten by the things that live in the dark, his left arm had drifted up toward the surface as if he were still pleading for rescue.

Then, at the last moment, Victor's face turned upward as if he wanted to get one last look at me. By some trick of moonlight his face glowed through the water with such a peace and calm that I'd felt a savage pang of envy. *How was it fair that the cheater, the liar got to slip away so easily from all of life's troubles and pain, while I was left behind to suffer beyond all suffering?*

"I didn't feel bad right away," Angel continued. "I felt strong for getting the best of him, and I felt free for the first time in my life." She looked me in the eye. "But now I'm afraid of going to jail." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm afraid of going to hell."

I pressed a hand over my heart as tears rose in my own eyes. "Don't worry about jail," I told her. "You have a great lawyer on your side, and I'll turn in an evaluation right after this session that will convince any jury in this county that you acted in self-defense."

"Really?" She dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand and I saw a faint glimmer of hope in them.

"Really," I said. I didn't mention the real price she's going to pay for her crime. She'll find out soon enough.

That first rush of freedom will soon be eaten away by guilt and an unrelenting fear of shadows and dark places. No matter how hard she works to atone for her sin, no matter how many women she keeps out of jail, she will see him everywhere. He will be across the street or in line behind her at the grocery store, waiting patiently for her to come join him. She will never sleep again without hearing his screams in her dreams. She will be afraid to be awake and terrified to sleep.

No one tells you when you take a life, you lose your own.

And, in the end, she'll realize the only real peace she'll ever find will be in the serene expression on her husband's face as he welcomes her to rest at his side in their watery grave.

I glanced at the clock and Angel shifted on the sofa. "Can I go now?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm done."

TOUT

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN | 5548 words

Stringer leaned against the rail of the Squinty Bridge, looked at the waters of the Clyde running below. It was high summer, the sun reflecting on the water, its light splintering and refracting. For just a moment, you might think it was safe to dive in. There was something about the water that made you think of summer days and hazy childhoods.

But D.I. Stringer knew better.

He'd seen things fished out of the water that would haunt most folks' nightmares. Suicides, mostly. Couple of murder jobs. The Clyde offered them all back sooner or later.

White finished his text, came over to join his partner, and stared down at the water too. "You looking for something?"

"Always."

White shook his head. He stretched over his head, arched his back. Let loose a yawn. Two joggers came past. Looked like a couple, maybe. Dressed in matching duds, digital watches, and pedometers. Maybe hit by Commonwealth Games fever. Maybe just middle class enough to think they looked cool jogging along the waterfront.

Stringer looked over at White and said, "You never find time for contemplation?"

"Nah. Life's bad enough. Start thinking about it, you'll wind up taking a header down there."

"Drowning," Stringer said, and shuddered. "No way to go."

"You've got a point," White said. "Mind you, can't think of any way I'd like to go. They say you can feel it, even in your sleep."

Stringer shook his head. What could you say to that?

They got back to the Major Investigations Team pool sometime after two. They'd stopped for lunch at a cafe near the river, then taken a brief walk. For a moment, it could have been any other day. They could have been two citizens in their shirts and ties. But they weren't. If they ever quit being police, they'd never quite fit in, never take a normal day for granted.

The morning had been spent at a scene over on the South Side. A wee flat near Govanhill where some lad had been found in a stairwell. Beaten, battered, bruised, bloodied. And dead. After seeing that, you needed a bit of sunshine, a bit of time with people who'd never have to see such things.

Stringer, as the lead detective, led the presentation to the D.C.I. The D.C.I. Brown, scratched at his face as Stringer talked, like he had a

persistent rash.

"Wee lad's name is Raymond Banks. Twenty-six, unemployed. A few cautions for possession of class B drugs, mostly marijuana. No jail time. No kids. No wife. Parents still alive. We talked to them at the scene. Someone who knew the lad's face called them. They arrived five minutes after us. I'd say they were upset but not surprised at how he died."

D.C.I. Brown shifted in his chair. His body fat redistributed itself slowly. A human lava lamp. He coughed. Stringer and White looked elsewhere in the room. When Brown moved, it could be hypnotic. Everything wobbled. Then: "They live nearby?"

"Yes, sir. How they arrived so fast."

"Paramedics?"

"On the scene before us. But he was already dead. Nothing much they could do. Go through the motions, maybe. For the benefit of the parents."

Brown nodded. His chins sank into his chest.

"Anything unusual?"

"Not that we saw."

"The lad have any enemies?"

"Again, initial enquiries haven't shown anything."

"But..." White ventured, before going silent again. Suddenly thinking better of opening his mouth.

"But?" Brown said.

Stringer looked at his fellow detective before taking a deep breath. "But... one of the residents on the scene said Banks had come into some money recently."

"How?"

White stepped forward. "I took the statement, sir. The witness refused to give his name."

"Ran off," said Stringer. "Sharpish, like."

"What did he say, your mysterious 'deep throat'?"

White tugged at his tie. He was tall, gangly, looked more like a college student than a cop. Thirty-four, unlined and with cropped, dark hair. A stark contrast to the senior detective, who was shorter and heavier, and looked like he could handle himself if things got that far.

"He said the kid had tickets for the games. Not through official channels. You know, he'd been acting as a tout. Making some good scratch off the scam."

"The Commonwealth Games?"

Stringer said, "Yes, sir. If they were fakes, his punters would find out soon enough. All the same, not getting into the hundred metre hurdles... it's not really grounds for murder, sir."

Brown thought about this. "Depends. They've been cleaning up the East End and the South Side for over a year, now. Closing down buildings, tarding

up streets. Removing the more undesirable elements in the area." He smiled. His lips were strikingly dark compared to the rest of his face.

"Could be the next stage. Come to Glasgow 2014. We'll kill our touts to keep you comfortable."

White tugged at his tie again. His mouth struggled to find an uncertain smile at the joke.

Stringer didn't bother trying. Said, "I'm not sure if it's relevant, the touting, I mean. More likely, the money itself is what's important."

"This was a mugging?"

"Occam's razor, sir. He didn't have much on his body."

"Occam's... what?"

Stringer took a breath. Brown was a simple man. Like to tell everyone how he got where he was by not attending university. "Occam's razor. Whatever the simplest answer is, it's probably correct."

"This Occam... he was a copper, aye? Because that's police work!"

Back at Stringer's desk, White leaned in and said, "You don't think it had anything to do with his death?"

"You heard the way ol' Jabba Brown laughed us out the office. No, I don't. I think the whole tout thing I... he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

White nodded, pulled up a chair, and collapsed into it. "So what do you think?"

"I think this one's an unsolved. I think there's going to be DNA evidence. I think there's going to be hairs. I also think none of that will matter a shite because we'll never find the owner of said evidence."

White shrugged.

"Most crimes," Stringer said, "are solved because the murderer is found standing over the corpse or because against all the odds, some eejit witnesses what happens, or the moronic criminal happens to do his deed beneath a CCTV. Most criminals, they're stupid. Most murderers, doubly so. I know you haven't worked too many murders, but you'll see. This one, however—"

"—a stone-cold whodunit."

"What, you heard that on a police show?"

White hesitated before nodding.

Stringer almost smiled. "Why do you think I stopped for lunch on the way back over? Gotta take the pleasures where you can. Because a case like this, it can only end in headache and heartache."

White ran his hands across his buzz cut. Neither man said anything else for a while.

Stringer clicked another card. Solitaire. All the processing power at his

command, and he was flipping electronic cards.

White was at his own desk, just behind Stringer's, checking information on Raymond Banks.

"Hey, Great Detective!"

White quit typing, turned in his chair.

"You really think you're going to find something in his priors?"

"It's worth a check." White didn't quite whine, but came close.

"Okay, I get it. You're still young—"

"—I'm a year older than you."

"Who's the inspector around here?"

"Aye, well. I'm a late bloomer."

"What I'm saying is that we know enough about this guy, Banks. He was small-time. Look up all the priors and known associates you like, it's not going to change that. The chances of someone holding a grudge—that kind of grudge, anyway—are small. The chances that he crossed the wrong person or broke omertà or whatever you think he did, they're negligible. This wasn't a hit. This wasn't an execution. It was a stairwell mugging. Statistically, chances are that it was someone unknown to the victim. Chances are the murderer didn't plan what he was doing. This wasn't personal."

"Seemed vicious to me."

"First murder job I worked was the same kind of scene. I was a D.C., same as you, maybe a bit less time on the job, but, you know, D.I. was a guy by the name of Crawford. Think he's working OCCT these days." Organised Crime and Counter Terrorism. One of the smallest branches in the new Police Scotland structure, their powers and responsibilities still subject to Metropolitan approval from down south. "We got the call to head out to a scene somewhere in Sheckleston. Aye, you can imagine. Kid like this—small-time dope dealer, way I remember—bled out in an alley. Multiple stab wounds. Vicious. I mean, the kind of vicious you would think was personal. I thought it was for sure. Like you, I was looking for some contract killer or whatever the hell it was my imagination cooked up when I first saw the scene."

"And the D.I., he disagreed?"

"Aye. So we closed off the scene, took a walk. Three streets away, slouched in the doorway of a shuttered betting shop, we found the bawbag slumped there, still holding the knife, still with the blood on his shellsuit. We brought him in. No resistance. No fight. In the room, he talked. No prompting. No tricks. All we did was get him an Irn Bru to get his sugar levels back up. And he confessed."

"And?"

"He didn't know the victim. What he said was he was fixing for some easy money, saw this guy earlier in the pub flashing around some cash, and followed him. The alley was perfect. Our bawbag had form. He'd done this

kind of thing before. So he did what he usually did, except this time the victim tried to fight back."

"So he stabbed him?"

Stringer nodded. Slumped his shoulders, screwed up his face, put on an exaggerated accent, approximating the guy he'd had in the room all those years ago. "Aye, and ken, man, once I started, I couldnae stop. Like, once wasnae enough. Kept stabbin' and stabbin' and stabbin'. Man, like I wasnae me, ken what I mean? I'll put someone down, but I wouldnae... aw man, aw man, aw man..." Stringer straightened again, shook his head. Back out of character. "Committing a crime isn't easy. It's not like buying a loaf of bread or deciding to take sugar in your coffee instead of nothing at all. No matter how psychotic you might be, a part of you knows that what you're doing is wrong. So it's easy for the act to get out of control. I've seen criminals—professionals, I mean, in the same way that a doctor is a professional—talk about how they're somehow different from others of their kind because they plan methodically and they think about what they're doing. But in the end, one little thing goes wrong and your professional guy is as likely to get as sloppy as someone committing a crime of passion."

"Aye?"

"Oh, aye. What we have here is a stone-cold whodunit. Because we never found anyone near the scene, we never got any witnesses. No matter what the Great God Gil Grissom tells everyone on that bloody CSI every other week, forensics isn't what's going to catch. Forensics only seals the deal. It's your own bloody stupidity or sometimes just blind luck that gets you caught. Look at the Yorkshire ripper. What brought Sutcliffe down? A stupid false numberplate on his car. Dumb luck, really."

White nodded. Turned back to his computer. Continued to look through reports, priors, and evidence.

Stringer went back to his game. Aiming for a personal best.

"Stone cold?"

The canteen. Stringer chowing down on a sausage sandwich, his phone on the table in front of him. White dropped a printout next to the plate, grabbed the chair across the other side of the table. Smiling.

"Tell me."

"You're going to pretend you knew all along, and make out like this was some mentoring thing."

Stringer swallowed his last bite. Sat back. Said nothing.

"Git."

Stringer still didn't say anything. Had the air of a besuited Buddha about him.

"Okay, so you want me to spell it out?" White pulled the papers back across the table and read them again quickly as though to check he wasn't

about to make a mistake. "Last time he was arrested for touting tickets, he was sprung by a guy from Calvin and Harris."

"Let me guess..."

"...Oh, aye."

Gareth Patterson. A slob in a suit. A laughing stock among other solicitors. But beneath the sauce-stained tie and his ignorance of irons, he was smart, ruthless, and utterly amoral. Came from taking business from only one client.

Solomon Buchan. Glasgow's biggest drug baron. But more than that, his tentacles reached out to weapons, prostitution, and more. Name an illegal enterprise, chances were Buchan was involved or soon would be.

"So he was touting for Buchan?"

White shrugged. "Kicking back, maybe."

"Not too many games left in town."

"Aye, well, you know Buchan's attitude to competition."

The two men were silent for a moment. Stringer reached over and plucked the sheet from White's grasp. "Patterson acted for this guy Banks, what, four years ago?"

"Aye."

"And nothing since. Last time Banks got pinched, he served time. Not a word from Patterson."

"It was two months."

"Still time."

"On a legal-aid appointed solicitor too."

"So he's not in with Buchan anymore?"

"But he's still touting. What do you think Buchan's boys'd think about that, eh?"

Stringer read and reread the sheet. He said, "Let's say we go talk to Patterson, then?"

White adjusted his tie. "Why not? Least make it look like we're doing something. Keep D.C.I. Jabba happy."

"Aye. Until the next one comes along."

White looked at his watch. "I'd say we got another, what, half hour?" They both smiled. Police humour. It didn't have to be subtle. Just strike a chord.

Patterson was a short man, whose body made people think of a beach ball wrapped up in a crumpled, abandoned suit. His battle with baldness was one sided, and his left eye seemed to be constantly half closed, caught in the midst of winking at some girl.

When Stringer and White arrived at his office, he welcomed them in and insisted they sit down. He perched on the end of his desk. The settee near the window was low, and this was the only way that the solicitor could be

taller than anyone during a meeting.

Stringer didn't bother with pleasantries. "Several years ago you represented a lad by the name of Raymond Banks."

"Ticket tout, I recall."

"You have a good memory," White said.

Patterson tapped the right side of his head with his index finger. Gave the two detectives a grin that was too well rehearsed. "Need it in my business. Good memory. Good instincts too."

White said, "And a touch of moral elasticity."

"Pot," Patterson said, "meet kettle."

Stringer said, "The lad, Banks, he's dead."

"Shame. He was a good wee lad. Kind to his mother."

"They always are," Stringer said.

"She's pretty upset," White said. They were taking the one-two approach.

Not that it ruffled the solicitor. "I'll send her some flowers on behalf of the office."

Stringer said, "You never had anything to do with him after the case got thrown out?"

Patterson made a show of thinking about the question. "No reason to, as far as I know. It was a one-off deal."

"You don't do legal aid," White said. "So why represent him in the first place?"

Patterson nodded. "Good question, Detective Constable White. I can see you're on the fast track. A few years, you'll be telling this here one what to do." He smiled at Stringer.

Stringer didn't return the gesture.

Patterson continued, "Okay, taking on his case was a favour for another client."

"Name?"

Patterson said, "This client is a suspect?"

"We just want to talk to him..."

"I have a code of ethics, gentlemen. Now, I know how you feel about defence solicitors. I know you have ideas about who we represent. We are the opposition. But we are necessary. We have a function. We are the ones who always remember 'innocent until proven guilty.' And more importantly, we have certain standards."

Stringer said, "You're invoking confidentiality?"

"Exactly." Patterson pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb. Pantomimed the gesture. Making it obvious. "But maybe I could talk to this client myself. See if they'd be willing to come forward voluntarily to talk to you about poor Raymond."

"That would be appreciated," Stringer said.

"But you have no suspects?"

"Oh," Stringer said, as he and White stood up to leave. "I wouldn't say that, exactly."

Patterson's offices were on St. Vincent Street, in the heart of the city. Outside, the two detectives stopped on the pavement and looked around, as though checking no one was watching.

White said, "No, you wouldn't say that exactly, would you? Because you don't want to admit that we're fishing."

"It's a fine sport."

"Aye?"

"You never know what you're going to catch."

"Fishing in the Clyde? Probably dysentery."

"Oh, ye of little faith."

They walked down the road to where they'd parked. As they passed a homeless man holding out a cup, White dug into his pocket, threw some spare change.

"Thanks, pal!"

They walked on.

Stringer said, "What I don't get is that everyone accepts Banks was touting tickets for the Commonwealth."

"What no one seems to know is where he got them from."

"Does it matter? They were forgeries or resales. Either way, he was breaking the law."

A kid on a bike flashed between them. Both detectives stepped to the side. Stringer watched the kid as he continued, slipping between pedestrians with the kind of confidence that could slip into carelessness. Stringer shook his head. "Someone's going to be sorry."

White didn't seem to notice what had happened. "No one found tickets on the body. What we have is hearsay. There was nothing at his gaffe, either. So, what, he sold them all? Someone took them?"

At the car, Stringer entered the driver's side. White eased into the passenger's seat, reached for the stereo. Springsteen filtered through the speakers at a low volume. A compromise. White had his way, it would have been Bon Jovi all the way.

"He used to tout for Buchan, right? We know that even if we don't have the evidence."

"Sure." Stringer took two tries to start the engine. Eased into the traffic. It was late afternoon. The rush hour was beginning to assert its peculiar power as the first of the office workers streamed out of their airconditioned cubicles.

"But Patterson seems to have wiped his hands of any association. He's barely able to even admit to representing the lad. Meaning that Banks is on the outs, somehow. Not with Patterson, but with his former supplier. After

all, that slimy wee prat only dances to the tun of his master."

"Okay, but it happens. Buchan, the foosty old git, probably never even met Banks. You know how his operation works. He's isolated from the dayto-day. Takes kickbacks from his lieutenants and their schemes, but he himself is essentially untouchable."

"Sure, but he knows. Nothing happens in the chain without him knowing. We agree on that?"

Stringer negotiated between lanes of traffic. His attention was on the road. "Uh-huh, okay."

"So if Banks was let go from some operation, then the old man at least knows his name and at least approved."

"Right."

"A kid like that, he doesn't really care about kickbacks or anything. He does what it takes to survive. No money, no hope, no prospects. All he has is a record and form. Guys with form always go back to what they know best. It's a comfort. Touting was his game. And an opportunity like the Commonwealth Games is too big to miss."

"So, how does this get us to him being stabbed and left for dead?"

"Bear with me here. There's two possibilities I see, if we're really thinking this goes back to the old man. First is that Banks ripped off the tickets from the old man's operations. Maybe overcharged, kept some back for himself, breaking the original deal. Or else he took the tickets from one of the old man's operations."

"Like Robin Hood? No one steals from Buchan's crew. Not unless they're completely doo-lally."

"Or desperate."

Stringer shook his head. "I like the first option better."

"Banks ripped off Buchan?"

"Sure. You wouldn't take him on directly. You'd be a tool to even try. But maybe, you figure, ripping a little off the top, he might not notice. Or at least whoever it was you were dealing with, maybe you figure they wouldn't notice."

"Fine. So who was the handler, then? Who was Banks dealing with?"

Stringer, in the driver's seat, turned his head and winked. He was heading south. White, with less time on the job, less time in the city, still had a lot to learn.

In the good old days, there would have been a tiny brass bell that made a gentle tinkling noise when a customer entered. As it was, when the two detectives walked into the barely stocked corner shop, a tinny-sounding electronic chime echoed across the floor.

A bored looking man in his mid forties raised his head to check out his latest customers. He sighed long and hard when he saw Stringer,

straightened up, and closed the adult magazine he'd been idly perusing. He'd leaned on the counter as though it was too much effort to stand up straight.

"Thomas Mackenzie!" Stringer said, like an actor aiming for the cheap seats with his insincerity. "How's business?"

"How's yer arse?"

Stringer kept grinning. Turned to White. "D.C. White, I'd like you to meet a pillar of the local community. Thomas Mackenzie, this is Detective Constable White."

"Showing him the ropes?"

"He knows the ropes. Just doesn't know you."

"Do I need to call my solicitor?"

"I don't know," White said, idly checking the tins on one of the shelves. Lots of beans and spaghetti hoops. Most close to being out of code. Bashed too. Like they'd quite literally fallen off the back of a lorry. "You tell us."

Stringer walked over to the till. He leaned in to Mackenzie with a conspiratorial air. Still playing to the nosebleeds. The kind of *sotto* whisper you could hear down the other end of the street. "He's not a people person."

White looked over, then returned to inspecting the tins.

Stringer said, "How's business anyway. Place looks jumping."

"People can smell the cops," Mackenzie said. "Soon as you two are gone, I'll be fine."

"I'm beginning to think you don't want us here."

White shook his head. "I'm hurt."

Mackenzie sighed, stepped out from behind the till. "This is harassment."

Stringer said, "I get it, you want to know why we're here. You're a busy man. You don't have time for pleasantries."

Mackenzie tried to stare Stringer down.

White said, "A few years back, you got done selling fake tickets for the Take That reunion gig from behind the counter. Quite a few angry women lined up to give testimony, as I heard it."

Stringer said, "He had form, but I guess he got sloppy."

"Just get on with it."

"Not the kind of job you should be doing yourself. Time was, you'd have hired some grubby wee nobody to take the rap. Speaking of which, you know a kid by the name of Banks?"

Mackenzie shrugged. Slow and laconic.

White quit examining the produce, joined the other detective. The two of them staring down Mackenzie while he did his best to look unimpressed.

"He was found dead this morning," said White.

Mackenzie didn't react.

Stringer took up the baton: "Murdered. Stabbed to death, in fact. Looked personal."

"I didn't know him."

White nodded. "He was touting Commonwealth tickets."

"Fakes."

"Good ones too. The way people are talking. Not the kind of rubbish wee nyaffs like that usually try and shift."

Mackenzie said, "I run a shop these days. That's it. No scams. No funny business. This place operates aboveboard. I wouldn't bloody jeopardise it. I have my second chance: I'm grasping it with both hands."

"And with a handout from old man Buchan."

"He's community minded."

"Think if we look deep enough into your finances, everything in here comes back aboveboard?"

"You have a warrant? I mean, you can't just come in here and make blind accusations, aye?"

The three men stood in silence.

Mackenzie was the one to break it. "Arrest me. Question me. Detain me. Or piss off out my shop."

As they left, Stringer turned, threw out his parting shot. "You do have a connection," he said. "To the kid. The two of you have the same scumbag solicitor. I think he'll be calling you soon. If he hasn't already."

In the car, the windows down, the July heat finally kicking in. The two men were sweating in their suits. Stringer wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. White flicked on the air-conditioning. Both men closed their eyes as the cold air flooded the vehicle.

"So what did we achieve?" White asked. "I mean for all the intimidation, all the veiled threats, what did we really achieve today?"

"It's a stone cold. All we can do is let them know we're not stupid. That we know what we're up to."

"And again I ask, what does that achieve exactly? How does it turn Banks's death from unsolved to solved?"

"If nothing else, it feels good. Lets them know that sooner or later, they will be caught. Lets the bosses think that maybe we're following up on this and not just sitting on our hands because we know that we'll never get a conviction or even a suspect. Right now, Mackenzie's talking to the old man, letting him know that they need to watch out. And maybe, because it's fun, Mackenzie's telling the old man that he thinks Patterson squealed. It's siege warfare, between us and men like Buchan. But one day... Look, we take our victories where we can. I take mine from making guilty men sweat."

"You sound confident," White said.

"I have to be. What's the alternative?"

"This morning you were all ready to let it go."

"What can I say? Your zeal inspired me, Constable."

White shot him the finger, turned on the stereo. Bon Jovi was living on a prayer.

Stringer shook his head. Started the engine. "One day, we're going to have a talk about your musical choices."

White closed his eyes, laid back against the headrest. Allowed himself the smallest of smirks.

Back at Major Investigations, D.C.I. Brown caught them as they walked in. He was midway through a fudge donut, the cream spilled down onto his shirt. Neither detective mentioned it. They couldn't be sure if he hadn't noticed or just didn't care. Either way, Brown's wrath was not something to be invoked.

"You two just stumble through life, don't you? Never mind solid police work, you just stand around with your fingers in your arseholes until the case solves itself."

"Sir?"

Brown jerked his head, indicating they should follow him. He led the detectives down to interview room two. Outside, he said, "We've been waiting for you two eejits to get back so you can talk to this one. He got picked up for trespassing on private property. Someone saw him breaking into a vacant, got unusually civic for Govanhill and decided to dob him in."

Stringer said, "I don't understand—"

"When he was apprehended, the wee prick was covered in blood that the officers in question quickly determined was not his own. His first words were, so I believe, 'I dinnae mean tae kill him. I dinnae mean it,' which tells me he's guilty of something."

"How do you know he's our suspect?"

Brown grinned. "Exhibit A. Twenty-five fantastically forged tickets for our glorious Commonwealth Games found on the suspect's person. Also, some enterprising D.C.I. decided, when he couldn't get hold of his star detectives from the newly formed Major Investigations Team, to show our suspect a few pictures. And guess whose mug it was that caused him to break down in tears and start confessing all over again?"

White said, "Did he say why?"

"Why don't you two earn your pay, get in there and ask him? And I can get back to this bloody donut."

The kid was twenty-two years old, junkie-thin, and pale. He kept his head down, as though his chin had been permanently fused to his chest. His dark hair fell in matted strands, further obscuring his face. He mumbled. He kept reaching up and pulling out his scraggly facial hair one strand at a time.

"Billy," Stringer said, taking the lead, while White leaned against the door, arms folded. "Billy, do you know where you are?"

Billy looked up for a moment, said, "Am I going to the chair?"

"This is Scotland, we don't have the chair. Or the death penalty."

"Oh. Not even if I killed someone?"

"We do have solicitors though and we need to call one for you. You need someone in the room when we talk to you or whatever you say is inadmissible."

"What?"

"Do you have a solicitor?"

"Um... no."

"We're going to—"

"Everyone knew he had tickets," the kid interjected. "Like, for the games. Aye, was selling them. Making good money."

"Billy—"

"I just wanted a piece of it. I thought, he's no' a hard man, he's not going to fight back, aye? I thought, just go for it."

White stepped forward. "So you thought you'd rob him?"

Stringer turned to hold up a hand, telling his partner to be quiet. Anything Billy said now, he could take back later. They needed a solicitor present. The old days, where they could hold someone for six hours without legal representation, were gone, replaced by a new order. They needed a legal presence in the room.

It didn't matter, though. Billy wanted to talk. And he kept his chin attached to his chest as he did so. "I, I followed him. In the stairwell. Held the knife to him. Said I'd cut him if he didn't give it up. He looked at me and laughed. Laughed. Like I was a joke. People laugh a lot, man. I am a joke. I didn't want to... I just meant to slice him a wee bit, show I was serious, like."

The two detectives leaned across the table. For all three men, the world was contained within the four walls of the interview room. Billy wanted to confess. He wasn't a gangster, wasn't a criminal mastermind, wasn't a psychopath. The way he sat, the way his skeleton-thin body moved at odd angles, and the way his pincer fingers twisted the hair in his scraggly beard, all of that spoke to his guilt, the way it consumed him, the way it appalled him to even think about what he had done.

"I just meant, like, one wee slice. Across the face, maybe. And then it was two. Three. Four. I stopped... I mean I couldn't... count." He started crying, then. Shuddering. "I killed him, man. Took the tickets. Ran for it. No one saw. No one saw..."

Stringer and White exchanged a look.

And they let him talk. Because he needed to.

That evening, Stringer filed the report. White sat next to him, haggled over words and details.

Before they submitted it, they took a break, sat back.

White said, "Occam's razor."

"Aye?"

"Simplest explanation."

"Someone took him off for his tickets?"

"Someone unknown."

"And there was you with your conspiracy theories."

"That you bought into."

"Well, we rattled some cages. I mean, kept Buchan and his boys on their toes."

"Aye, sure, didn't do any harm, right?"

"No. And you saw the look on Patterson's face when we left his office?"

"Like he thought he was done for? Oh, yes."

"And Mackenzie?"

"When you made that crack about Patterson? Aye, someone's got some explaining to do."

"So, what you say we file this, clock off, have a wee pint at Sloans?"

"Aye, why not?"

They submitted the report. Made to grab their jackets.

Brown came out of his office. Saw them leaving.

"You two! Hold on a sec!"

The two detectives looked at each other. Just a few seconds earlier, and they'd have been out of the room. Away from his majesty's whim. As it was, they knew they were up for whatever had just come through.

"You went to see that slimeball Patterson, right?"

"Right."

"Then you're up."

"On what?" Stringer asked.

"Body just fished out the Clyde."

"We were about to—"

"Head down to the scene, aye? Take a look?"

The scene was strobed with blue.

The Squinty Bridge had been closed off. Already, bystanders were beginning to gather, gawking over the closed-off scene, looking for a glimpse of drama.

Stringer and White parked a few streets away, walked down. The uniform on the tape recognised them, let them through.

They were allowed within a certain distance of the scene before the responding officer approached. Sergeant Keller was a deceptively lightlooking woman with dark hair tied back. She shook her head as she approached. "You know, I thought suicide when they told me who it was."

Stringer and White exchanged a glance.

"No one told you?"

Stringer couldn't help smiling, but there was no humour in his expression. "Aye, so maybe old Jabba gave us a wee hint."

White said, "He asked about whether we spoke to Patterson earlier today."

"Then maybe you know who it was cut his throat."

Stringer walked away. He walked to the edge of the bridge and looked at the waters. In the dark, they looked different. They could hide your sins. They could swallow all the horrors the city had to throw into them.

White walked over and looked into the dark with him.

"We were trying to stir up a hornet's nest."

"For no reason. Chasing conspiracies and masterminds when all we were looking for was a wee nyaff who lost control."

"Why kill Patterson, then?"

"Because it looked like he was talking out of school. Maybe he went to the old man after our visit, but when I threw his name at Mackenzie, maybe that set off alarm bells in Buchan's organisation. Better safe than sorry. And what better way to send a message than to kill the one man we would have thought was indispensable."

"We know who did it—or who ordered it, at least."

"But we have no proof."

White spat into the water. "So it goes."

"So it goes."

The two detectives straightened.

White said, "Stone-cold whodunit?"

"That's how we write it up."

"Unless we're wrong again."

"Twice in one day?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"In this city? You're probably right."

They walked back towards where the body had been fished out of the water. Overhead, a helicopter hovered, shining a spotlight on the scene. Soon, the light would go out.

LOUISA AND THE SILVER BUCKLE

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG | 6549 words



Art by Linda Weatherly

I was sitting on my porch in Cape May, New Jersey, when the mailman arrived. He dropped off the usual bills, a flier for half-price burgers at a local bar, and an invitation to a Cape May event.

That invitation started it all. Or maybe not. After all, had I not been reading Louisa May Alcott, I wouldn't have recognized the clue that told me who had done it.

No, I wasn't reading *Little Women*. Not that I don't like that wonderful novel. I reread it every two years. But this wasn't a *Little Woman* year. This year, I was immersing myself in Alcott's gothic short stories.

Ah, what a perfect day it was for the story. The rain pattered on the roof of my porch; to the left of my condo, the reds and blues of the stainedglass windows of the little Gothic church were darkening as if reflecting the mood of the story.

I gave a cursory glance at the bills and the flier, tossed them on the wicker table, and looked at the invitation. I was tempted to open it, but more tempted to continue reading. I had reached a crucial point in the story. Cecil, the protagonist, had just entered the mansion of a young cousin whose existence had deprived him of his uncle's fortune. He is struck by her beauty and charm, but something about her plants a seed of distrust in him.

Having reached that critical point, I decided to stop so that while I warmed up a pizza and made a salad, I could savor the crucial point and try to figure out what came next. Not that I hadn't read the story before. But that was three years ago. I paced the stories deliberately. That was easy. Louisa had written dozens of horror and mystery stories to earn enough money to support her family.

"Hmmpf," I said to myself, as I always did when I thought of Louisa slaving away writing to replace the money her impractical father Bronson had thrown away on his idealistic attempts to set up a utopia. Not even his money; his wife's, inherited from her father.

But then, had Bronson not wasted the money on his "Fruitlands" utopia, maybe Louisa would not have written so many stories. I forgave Bronson and put the pizza in the oven.

Then I turned to the invitation.

As I read, I became more and more interested. I was invited not to the usual Cape May mystery weekend or Victorian costume dinner. I was invited to a Louisa May Alcott evening. When I reached the part about the costumed impersonator, I scoffed. Who could possibly impersonate Louisa? In my mind, Louisa was inimitable. I didn't want to subject myself to some amateur's presentation of Louisa as a simpering Victorian woman. After all, she had been an abolitionist and a feminist, the first woman to register to vote in a school election in Concord, Massachusetts, a daring action at the time.

Besides, the Alcott event was scheduled for Sunday night, only four days from now. How dare the sponsors think I had so few friends or boyfriends or so little social life that I would have no plans for Sunday. I didn't, but I still felt insulted.

But then I saw that an Alcott scholar would also make a presentation: a lecture on Alcott's manuscripts, their printing history and their current whereabouts, and on Alcott's time here in Cape May. That I wanted to hear. I had hopes of writing a book on Alcott myself. Not some scholarly, boring analysis using the latest literary theory, but a book on why after two hundred years women still love her.

The evening's events would be held in a home near the Alcott Hotel where Louisa was reputed to have stayed with her family.

I looked at the price for the evening and winced. I was still paying off the cost of the repairs on the Cape May condo my aunt had left me. I had had to

put in a new stove and refrigerator and my part of the condo association's fee for a new roof on our one hundred and sixty year-old building. I'd almost backed out then and contemplated selling. But I couldn't give up a condo in a house on Washington Street, three blocks from the downtown shopping area and three blocks from the beach. Besides, Louisa had vacationed here in Cape May. To boot, the costumed interpreter's name, Cecilia, was the name of the beautiful cousin in the story I was reading.

So I decided I would attend the evening's events despite the insult and the price.

I took the pizza out of the oven and was searching for a knife to cut it up when I glanced out of my kitchen window. Across the rather junglelike stretch of ground, the construction workers were knocking off for the day. "Good," I thought. I could take my pizza and Louisa's story back out on the porch and eat and read with no hammering to disturb me.

Not that I really minded the construction noise that much. The house behind my condo dated to the early nineteenth century. It had been occupied in the early and mid eighteen hundreds by a family of some wealth, then purchased by another family, then in the early twentieth century, left to fall apart by an impoverished owner. When I heard that someone had finally bought it from the city and intended to rehabilitate it, I was thrilled. An eyesore removed. Little by little the old house was recovering, its Victorian floors and wainscoting no doubt regaining luster by multiple applications of wax and polish. What Victorian beauties might the house yield? Little did I know. Then.

So I ate my pizza and read more of Louisa's story. Cecil had decided to paint a portrait of his cousin, with whom he was increasingly smitten. The cousin insists on sitting for the portrait in the costume of an ancestor, down to the lace on a dress and silver buckles on the shoes. Still utterly charmed and yet distrusting his cousin, Cecil follows her on a stormy night to an old hovel on the estate. There, he sees and hears an old woman, Elspeth, threaten to expose Cecilia's real ancestry if she does not allow Elspeth to share in the riches of the estate.

I stopped there, picked up the invitation again, and noticed that it had been initially delivered to the wrong address. I felt better, enclosed a check in the envelope provided, put on a stamp, and walked to the mailbox at the nearby post office, pleased at the nice touch of using snail mail instead of e-mail.

I walked back to my condo, picked up the plate, fork, and glass from my porch table, and returned to my kitchen to clean up. It was now getting dusky. The construction workers had all left, except for the chief man who always left last.

I washed my plate and fork, then looked up again and frowned. A light flickered through an upstairs window in the house under construction. Then

it disappeared. A moment later, it appeared again in a downstairs window.

I reached for my cell phone in case I had to call the police. The back door of the house opened and I recognized the chief construction man emerge. He locked the door, tossed some pieces of wood to the side, and left.

I breathed easy. No intruder. I must have seen the flashlight he'd been using since the electricity had obviously not been turned on yet. I forgot all about the incident until after the Alcott evening.

The evening proved better than I'd anticipated. The costumed interpreter, by name of Cecilia Turnbull, wasn't half bad. As Louisa, she talked about her crush on Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had tutored her when she was a young girl, then talked about her young years as a seamstress and governess to help support her family. She spoke of her fascination with Charlotte Brontë, who, like herself, had worked hard to support her family. Cecilia stopped just as she reached the years Louisa had served as a nurse in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. Of course, she promised more evenings of costumed interpretations, presenting characters Louisa had created. So Turnbull proved to be pretty shrewd. She'd drawn us all in, ready to pay again to hear more, and invited us all to attend another session in two evenings, dressed as the character in the very story I was reading, at a price, of course.

Next came Clyde Linville, the Alcott scholar, not half bad looking for a dusty professor type. He spoke about Louisa's lost short stories, startling a fair number of the audience. I felt smug since I knew all about the stories, but then sat up straight when he began to talk about Louisa's time in Cape May. She had stayed, he said, not only in the hotel now called the Alcott Hotel, but, his research had led him to believe, in the home of a friend. He described the location of the house, mentioned that it had been recently purchased and was being renovated.

My pulse sped up considerably and my imagination went haywire. Louisa had stayed in the house behind mine. Maybe I hadn't seen the chief construction worker and his flashlight. Maybe I'd seen Louisa with a candle, putting it out just before she stopped writing and went to bed. Maybe she'd come over to visit neighbors and sat with them on my front porch. Maybe... I brought my imagination to a screeching halt.

A Mr. Paul Andrews, a member of the audience, who identified himself as a collector of Alcott memorabilia, in possession of publishers' lists of her short stories, was speculating on the possibility of some Alcott memorabilia in the house behind mine.

"I have no positive knowledge of this, but rumors have persisted for years. Of course," he said, "rumors of a possible lost manuscript have circulated wildly since the reconstruction work has begun on the house. Maybe just rumors, exaggerated no doubt, but still, Louisa often wrote notes and letters to her friends. Her friends often kept them. After all,

Louisa was making a name for herself as a writer. A letter or a note wouldn't carry the value of a manuscript well into the thousands, but a letter would be quite a find anyway. Of course, when they left, the family may have destroyed or taken any letters with them. The family never returned to the house because their money was lost in some poor speculations in New England." He turned to Linville and asked if Linville knew about the house.

Linville looked annoyed at even a remote suggestion of a hole in his vast knowledge of the Alcotts. "Of course," he said. "And, Mr. Andrews, anything is possible of course, but I sincerely doubt that any notes or letters of Louisa's, let alone a manuscript, were left in the house."

Andrews looked skeptical. "Remains to be seen," he mumbled. "Of course, one would need the owner's permission to search. So far he's not given permission to anyone who's asked. At least not that I'm aware of." He glared at Linville. "He's unlikely to do so until he has returned to do so himself."

I thought of the construction worker and his flashlight. Surely, he'd heard the rumors. He didn't have anything in his hands when he left, but he certainly had pockets.

I asked the speakers if anyone had at any time searched the house for such memorabilia. Dr. Linville said he had no knowledge that anyone had. Mr. Andrews agreed and then remarked that anything found would belong to the present owners, though they might be willing to sell.

A tall elderly woman, seated behind me, bumped my chair. I turned round and blinked. She was staring with unabashed malevolence at Linville and Andrews in turn. Her face was withered, like that of Elspeth in Louisa's story.

She leaned forward and gripped the back of the chair next to me.

I shivered. Her fingers were bony, the skin lying in folds over the joints. I had to tear my eyes away.

The evening came to an end. I sat for a moment, basking in the knowledge that Louisa herself might well have sat on my porch. Maybe she'd even been inside, having tea with her neighbors, discussing the oncoming Civil War.

Then I rose and turned to the door in the back. The old woman who had been seated behind me stood by the door. Her body seemed to have concentrated all the arthritis in the fingers and left her back perfectly straight. She stood upright, tall and thin, her eyes large and dark above perfectly carved cheekbones. She must have been a beauty, though now her skin was like parchment. Nevertheless, she was still commanding.

I walked past her slowly, wondering who she was and who she was waiting for, and, most of all, why she still had that malevolent look in her eyes.

I spent the next day walking several times past what I now thought of as the Alcott house, letting my imagination run wild. I saw Louisa sitting on the porch and walking in the garden.

Then I could resist no longer. I just had to know what view Louisa would have had of my house from the back garden of the Alcott house. So I ducked under the construction ropes and walked up the side driveway. Several construction workers stopped pounding and carrying wood and stared. One yelled. I don't speak Spanish, but of course no one could mistake his meaning. "Get out; this is a construction site."

"Is there anyone who speaks English?" I asked.

The workers consulted each other. Then one looked up at the second story and yelled "Ramon!"

A good-looking man, somewhat resembling Clark Gable, his shirt opened, came to the window. He looked down, spotted me, and frowned. "No trespassing, lady," he yelled.

"I own the house back there. I would like to take just a short look around." I used the best pleading voice I could muster.

"Just a minute," the handsome man yelled. In less than a minute, he emerged from the house, took a long look at me, and leered. "For a goodlooking dame like you, I guess I can make an exception to the rule."

I really resented the "dame," and figured Louisa would have punched his face in, good looking or not, but I didn't want to screw up my chance to get to the back garden.

"What's your name, little lady?" he asked.

I resented the "little lady" even more. I'm in my forties and I do not conceive of myself as a little lady, but as a woman. I said nothing.

My lack of response offended the Clark Gable construction manager. He gave me a nasty look.

So I gave him an answer. "Scarlett O'Hara," I said.

He looked puzzled.

I edged to the back garden. I saw that had Louisa been sitting out here, she would have seen me at my kitchen window. I turned and looked at the back of the house. "Those big windows," I said to Clark Gable, pointing to the windows on the second floor, "are they a modern touch or were windows that large originally there?"

"Why do you want to know, little lady," Clark asked, half sneering, half crooning.

"Because I not only own the condo just back of this yard, I also work for the Cape May Homeowners' Association," I said, lying smoothly.

Clark stepped back. "We've had the plans approved already, so what are you doing here?"

"Just making sure. That's my job. So just answer my question and I'll be out of your hair and you out of mine. Were the windows part of the bedrooms upstairs?"

"Yeah," Clark said. "You can consult all the damn papers we had to fill out. Anything else?"

"Nope," I said, walking back toward the street. I could feel Clark's eyes boring into my back. But I found out what I wanted to know. If Louisa had done any writing in the house, she might well have sat in one of those bedrooms, by a window overlooking my house. God, I felt great. I decided to treat myself to a great lunch at the Lobster House.

I was digging into my clams and slathering them with butter when I noticed two patrons walk in. The man I recognized immediately. Dr. Clyde Linville wore a blue suit with a slightly askew blue tie. He'd obviously dressed for a luncheon, but he didn't look happy. He looked nervous.

Walking beside him was a tall, good-looking woman. Her dark hair was sleeked back, leaving her square-shaped face and large, dark eyes fully front and center. It took me a moment to recognize her in the absence of the full heavy locks she had worn the night of her Alcott presentation. Cecilia was smiling.

They took a seat not far from me, so with just a little lean to the right, I could half hide behind a column and watch them both. I was interested because I couldn't reconcile his sour face with her smiling one. After some discussion with the waiter, Linville ordered. A few moments later, the waiter returned with coffee for Linville and a glass of red wine for Cecilia. She sipped at it and occasionally leaned forward toward Linville, talking intently and smiling. I couldn't believe what I was seeing because I thought what she was doing had gone out of style with Theda Bara and other 1920s actresses. She was batting her eyes at Linville.

Why, I wondered. Linville was, well, no Clark Gable; not even a Fred MacMurray; more a David Niven type, rather dapper. I rather liked that type. Still, I doubted the beautiful Cecilia did. Maybe she was just being enterprising and taking the opportunity to pick Linville's scholarly brain for info on the Alcotts. I couldn't blame her.

I went back to my clams and beer, savored both, and was contemplating ordering another round of both when Cecilia caught my attention again. She had risen; she glared at Linville, then stomped out of the Lobster House. Linville looked disconcerted. He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed the little scene. His eyes met mine. I saw the flash of recognition come over his face.

I nodded. He nodded back, then turned to the hamburger the waiter had set in front of him. I couldn't imagine why anyone would order a hamburger in the Lobster House with its displays of lobster, clams, shrimp, and some unknown species of marine life. But to each his or her own.

I finished my beer, sat for a while, letting my mouth relish the last lingering taste of clams, then rose to go.

My movement caught Linville's attention and he nodded again. I made a quick decision. Cecilia shouldn't have all the fun.

I walked over to Linville and introduced myself. "Amanda Gillman," I told him. "A Louisa May Alcott devotee." I told him I had enjoyed his talk and would certainly look forward to any new material on Louisa that he or anyone else might find in the house near mine.

Linville sat back and looked up at me. "I doubt anyone will find anything," he said. "And I hope Alcott fans, self-conceived, and I might add self-deluded, Alcott scholars do not on the basis of Andrews's unfounded speculations take it upon themselves to bear down on that house or spread rumors to bring other amateurs mobbing down." He picked up his fork and stabbed a piece of lettuce.

"Thanks for the advice," I said and left. Maybe the problem was that I hadn't batted my eyes. But no, that hadn't worked for Cecilia either. What the hell was Linville's problem? Either he was justly, as a scholar, appalled at the idea of us amateurs rooting around the house for nonexistent Alcott letters and manuscripts or he wanted to discover any material himself. And while I was speculating, I wondered what Cecilia had been up to. Was she trying to team up with Linville? Well, it hadn't worked. I also wondered if she planned to go over to the house and work on Clark Gable. She'd succeed there. Maybe I should have batted my eyelashes. But I'd felt more like batting Gable, and anyway my eyelashes are pretty skimpy.

I decided to head back to my porch. But I had one more surprise before I reached it.

I parked my car, thanking myself for having purchased a condominium with parking spaces, rare commodities in Cape May, and decided to walk a little before settling into the comfortable chair on my porch. Without even thinking, I walked down to Jefferson Street then turned left onto Columbia Street. I crossed the street, not wanting to encounter Clark Gable as I passed the Alcott house.

That's when I noticed a man walking on the other side maybe twenty feet ahead of me. He walked slowly, then stopped about ten feet from the Alcott house. He stood still, then walked again, stopped and looked into the driveway that led to the backyard. He moved slowly along the front of the Alcott house, his head up, as if he were examining the upper story of the house.

I recognized him. He wore the same plaid jacket he'd worn at the Alcott evening event: the collector, Paul Andrews.

Okay. Now I was convinced. Linville, Andrews, Turnbull. They knew something I didn't know, or at least, they thought they knew. But, of course, I had no idea what they knew. Letters or notes written by Louisa were in the house? Or were definitely not in the house? Or might be in the house? Did any of the three of them know the owner who maybe had found something? No, the owner, I knew, had conferred with the architect about the house, then took off to London and hadn't yet returned. The Cape May

Homeowners' Association had been definite about that. I wasn't an official member, as I'd told Clark Gable, but I'd attended meetings.

Something was going on. I walked back to my porch, wondering how I might find out what Linville, despite his protestations, Andrews, and/or Turnbull, and Clark Gable for that matter, were up to. I couldn't just call and ask. I decided that, for now, I would just keep a close eye on the Alcott House, especially in the evening when the construction workers left. If I saw any more flashing lights, I'd go over. Maybe. I'm not really that brave. But I could watch. So I went upstairs, dug out the two pairs of binoculars I use for bird-watching, and placed one in the back bedroom where I sleep and another down in the kitchen.

The evening's events at the Alcott house came right out of a John le Carré spy novel merged with a film noir. Spies spying on spies. I set up my spy nest in the kitchen: binoculars poised on the windowsill for quick use; coffeepot full to keep me awake; camera fully charged and ready to record any nefarious doings. I felt alternately idiotic and excited, to say nothing of righteous. After all, I was watching over putative Alcott memorabilia, protecting it from being spirited away. By Linville? By Andrews? By Turnbull...?

By nobody, you idiot, I told myself. I just wouldn't listen.

Just at about dusk, I rose from my chair to put on a new pot of coffee when I saw it. A flashlight. It moved around the upstairs room, settled down for a while, then moved again, then settled. Someone was searching for something. Clark Gable, surely. He would have a key to the front door, though given the still somewhat dilapidated condition of the other doors and windows, gaining entrance to the house would be no great feat for anyone.

I peered through my binos. I could make out light in an upstairs room, but whoever was searching had stepped out of the line of the window.

I considered calling the police. I didn't. I considered calling Linville or Andrews. But then maybe one of them was the searcher.

I waited and watched. That's what spies do.

Then I put down my binos for a minute to rub my eyes. I rubbed them, then rubbed them again. Either my eyes were deceiving me or my mind was deceiving my eyes.

I watched a shadow move up onto the back porch. It was someone big, wearing what appeared to be a large raincoat. Not surprising, since it had begun to rain with a rumble of thunder from the distance. The legendary dark and stormy night. By golly, they do happen.

I watched, mesmerized. The shadow stood by the back door a few moments, then yanked the door open, entered, and pushed the door closed.

Call the police, my reason insisted. I watched.

At the upstairs window, a figure moved into the line of the window. Clark

Gable, I was pretty sure, with a flashlight. He appeared to be absorbed in studying the room. All of a sudden, the light from his flashlight swung wildly and disappeared.

I had a hard time the next day telling the police exactly what I saw, or rather what I heard. I still can't swear on a Bible that I have the chronology exactly right. But I know what I heard a few moments after the light disappeared. A thump. Not a bang. A thump. Several thumps. Then a clap of thunder. The thunder might have come before the thump. I can't be sure. Then something like a shot. Okay, that one scared me. All the street lights went out.

I then immediately reached for my phone and called the police. Or maybe not immediately. I might have been frozen for a few moments: long moments. Anyway, I finally called the police. I told them I thought someone had been shot and gave them the location. While I was talking to them, I thought I heard a few more thumps.

I hung up and watched.

The figure in the dark raincoat emerged from the back porch and disappeared into the brush, cutting, I think, right past my house.

I didn't move. I could hear a siren in the distance.

You know how people in dangerous situations say everything happened in a blur? Well, they're right. I know the police came in a blur of whirling lights. I know I told them about the shot. The policeman I talked to had a blurry face. I know I stayed inside my kitchen, as they told me to. I know I watched out the window. I know I saw the ambulance arrive in a blur of white and blue. I know I saw the ambulance people go inside and emerge carrying someone on a litter.

Okay, now I'm on steadier ground. I did stay in my house, and I did give the police all the details I knew. I told them about the shadow. I told them about Clark Gable, describing him. I even told them about the possibility of something valuable in the house.

I think the police, though they listened politely, thought I was a bit blurry. They told me that there was no evidence of a shot having been fired. What I thought was a shot, they said, was likely the sound of a transformer blowing out. They had found the body of a man lying at the bottom of a pair of steep Victorian steps. He was dead, his head bashed in. Likely an accident, but that was yet to be determined. They implied that I'd best mind my own business.

Well, Louisa May Alcott is my business. After all, I was hoping to write a book about why we women love her. So I was determined. I had no intention of confronting Linville or Andrews, but I certainly intended to keep an eye on the house. The evening news confirmed that it had been Clark Gable, alias

Ramon Perella, who had been found dead. I figured Clark Gable, having heard the rumors of something valuable, had been after that something and so had "the shadow." I just had to know what exactly.

So that night, when dark fell, I set up my spy corner again. I didn't really expect to see anything. At least that's what my reason told me. Every other part of my being expected to see something.

Well, did I ever.

The first thing I saw was nothing more than a prick of light. Something on the grass had reflected the moonlight. A lightning bug, I thought. But then I rejected that idea. Lightning bugs usually, though not exclusively, light up when they are in flight, a kind of courtship ritual. So I hauled out my larger binos and studied the object. Definitely not a lightning bug or a glowworm or anything else biological. I hadn't noticed it the night before. I caught my breath when I figured out what it was. Then I lowered my binos and tried to calm myself. You think it's a buckle only because you've just finished Louisa's story "Betrayed by a Buckle."

I picked up the binos and studied the object again. But there was only one way to be sure and I had to be sure. I put down the binos, took a flashlight, tiptoed out, and slipped through the dilapidated fence and into the yard of the Alcott house.

I bent down and picked up the object. A silver buckle. So, I thought, that explains the big raincoat. I thought about Louisa's story. Again, I had to know.

I slipped under the yellow police barrier, crept up on the porch, and approached the back door. I expected to get no farther. Surely the door would be locked.

I pushed and the door moved. It didn't open; it just moved a little. I pushed again. The door crackled and groaned, then creaked open a notch.

I stepped back. I hadn't expected this. I felt fear, excitement, disbelief, not in any order, just all jumbled up.

Okay, I said, decide. I decided. I pushed the door open, stepped inside, and shut the door behind me. I stood for a moment wondering what the hell I was doing. After a few deep breaths, I suppressed reason, flipped on my flashlight, and looked around.

A mound of lumber stood in a corner. In another corner, tools lay on the floor. I recognized hammers and drills. Other tools I couldn't identify. In a couple of spots, plaster was missing from the walls, exposing studs. The wood floor on which I stood looked solid and new. I moved forward into the room beyond, walking through what must have been and would be again a double door. More mounds of lumber. I arrived at the foot of a staircase. I stopped and swallowed. Poor Clark Gable. I was willing to bet he'd been clobbered from behind with some lumber or a hammer, then pushed down these stairs, and I thought I knew who did it.

I crept up the stairs to the room whose windows I knew looked out onto my house. I moved the flashlight around. If I were on the right track, I'd see a fireplace in the room.

Sure enough, a fireplace with a nice Victorian ceramic tile hearth. Nice flowered and, best of all, loose tiles. The workers hadn't reached this room yet, except to pile some lumber in a corner. Poor Clark. Maybe he been looking for Alcott material, and maybe he'd just been inspecting the room to set up the workers for renovation. In the wrong place at the wrong time.

I stared at the hearth. Maybe Clark had found something and maybe not. Maybe whoever clobbered him had that something and maybe not.

I tiptoed to the fireplace, knelt, and put down the flashlight. I tugged at one of the tiles. Wouldn't move. I picked up a small piece of lumber and knocked gently on a few more tiles. Then I hit the right one. A hollow sound. I dug a finger under the loose mortar. The tile lost its weak grip and let go. I picked it up and loosened more tiles. I couldn't move, could hardly breathe. I guess I hadn't really expected to find it. But there it was.

I pulled it out. Very carefully. The paper was brittle, but the writing was still visible: "The Haunted Hotel," by Louisa May Alcott.

I was still kneeling in awe when I heard the footsteps behind me. I knew who it was. I put down the manuscript as carefully and speedily as I could, rose, and turned round to face Cecelia Turnbull. She was carrying a small pistol in one hand and a piece of lumber in the other. I couldn't take my eyes off the pistol.

"Give it to me," she said. "Pick it up slowly and put it down in front of you. Then step over to the window."

I knew what she had in mind. She had no intention of using the pistol. She knew the story "Betrayed by a Buckle" as well as I did.

If I went near that window, she'd manage somehow to bang my skull with the lumber and push me out just as she'd clobbered Clark and just as Louisa's character met her death falling out of a window.

"Do it," Cecilia growled.

I had no choice. But I took my time, hoping to think of something. I bent down slowly. "It's very brittle," I said.

I turned to get the manuscript and looked at the loose tile. Maybe I could fling it at Cecilia. I kept my back covering my arms, placed the manuscript over the tile, and slowly stood up. I hated to hold the manuscript in only one hand, risking damaging the pages. But I had no choice. I needed a free hand to hurl the tile.

I turned around slowly and froze. A dark figure was moving cautiously toward Cecilia. I watched, not breathing, hoping the pistol would not go off.

He grabbed Cecilia by the neck.

The pistol went off.

I dropped to my knees.

Somebody screamed. Maybe me. Maybe Cecilia.

"Get the gun," Linville shouted at me.

I put down the manuscript, carefully. "Where?"

"In the corner. By the window."

I scrambled to the pistol, grabbed it, stood up, and looked out of the window. I would have landed hard, probably on the lumber piled beneath. I might have been killed, or not. But I would have been injured enough to give Cecilia time to get the manuscript, come downstairs, and finish me off, probably with a blow to the head, just as she had finished off Clark Gable.

"So," Linville said, putting his teacup down on my wicker table, "the silver buckle gave you the clue. You knew Cecilia had read the story."

"Clearly, she had. At the second evening's performance, she was dressing as the key character who wears shoes with silver buckles. So she, too, was able to guess that, if indeed Louisa had left a manuscript in the house, it might well be hidden where the old lady in the story had hid the papers she was using to blackmail the key character. What I can't figure is why did Louisa leave the manuscript hidden?"

"She didn't," Linville said. "I have part of the story of how the manuscript happened to be there from my research into her letters. She wrote 'The Haunted Hotel' for the daughter of the family with whom she was staying. She gave the manuscript to the daughter. So it was never published."

"That doesn't tell me why the manuscript was hidden in the hearth."

"We'll never know for sure. But the family left in a hurry when the father's business collapsed. I think they intended to return. So the daughter left the manuscript, hiding it in the hearth, perhaps concerned that burglars might enter the empty house. The family never came back. The daughter died of pneumonia, not long after the family went bankrupt. Because of the father's profligate ways, I believe."

"Hmm," I muttered. "Another Bronson Alcott. Okay, I have another question. We know now from all the publicity that the old woman at the Alcott evening was Cecilia's mother. Do you know if she was somehow related to or part of the family with whom Louisa stayed?"

Linville looked surprised. "Yes. I was going to tell you. How did you know?"

"Before I tell you, let me make one more guess. Some ancestor of Cecilia's worked for the family."

Linville's eyebrows shot up higher. "Yes. The old woman's great great grandmother. I believe that—"

"No. Let me tell you. The rumor of a hidden manuscript passed down through the family to, among other Cape May residents, Cecilia's mother. And of course, once the renovations began on the house, the rumors took on new life."

"Right. But how did you... oh, of course. The old lady in 'Betrayed by a Buckle.' She worked for the rich uncle's family. And had papers crucial to herself and the cousin to claim the estate. I'd forgotten that part."

I smiled. "But you remembered the papers in 'Betrayed by a Buckle' hidden in the hearth. Is that why you were at the house that night? Mind you, I'm not complaining. If you hadn't been there, I'd be with Clark Gable right now. I would have been shoved out the window, dying by the same means as the character in the story."

"Clark Gable?"

"It's a long story. Clark Gable, alias Ramon Perella."

"Well, I did remember the hiding place of the papers in the story. I wanted to get there before Cecilia. I had lunch with her, and she pretty much tried to get me to go along with her to the house."

"Why?"

"I think she suspected I knew there was a manuscript and where it was. Despite my denials designed to keep fortune hunters out," Linville added sheepishly.

"If you'd fallen for her charms and gone with her, she'd probably have done you in, removing a rival treasure hunter," I added with a touch of a vengeful malice. "I doubt you would have emerged alive from the house. You would probably have joined Clark Gable."

"But do we know she actually killed him and why?"

"If you had listened to the news this evening, you would have heard that the medical examiner thinks the blow to his head came before the tumble down the stairs. We'll probably never know exactly why Turnbull bashed in Clark's head. Maybe he was getting too close to the hearth and maybe she just panicked at finding another person in the house. She was mighty determined to get that manuscript herself."

Linville nodded. "She was. What I don't know is why Turnbull didn't take the manuscript the night she did in, er, Clark Gable."

"The transformer blew and I called the police who came right away. She had no time to find the correct loose tile and dig out the manuscript."

Linville consulted his watch. "I must get the manuscript to the university. The owner has donated it. The quicker we begin working on its preservation, the better. But I insist on dinner again in three days. Then you can tell me the Clark Gable reference. Sorry I can't stay for tea." He looked around at my large porch. "Your place is wonderful."

"Dinner in three days is just fine. And tea afterward back here on the porch. In the meantime, I have something very important to do myself."

Linville cocked his head.

"I've got five more Alcott stories to read. Who knows? One of them might come in handy again."

Linville left. I went upstairs to my back bedroom, retrieved my book of

Louisa's stories, glanced out the window at the Alcott house, went downstairs, settled myself on my porch in my favorite wicker chair, and opened the book to the next story.

MISS WEST'S FIRST CASE

EVE FISHER | 6123 words

January 6, 1947, and I hadn't seen my boss, Ron Conroy, since January first, when he'd sneaked out of my flat at dawn holding his shoes and socks. "The least he could have done," I sobbed, "was kiss me good-bye and lie that he'd see me later." Johann Dreher, best friend and coworker, handed me a handkerchief and waited until I'd blown my nose and mopped up a bit. "Men are cowards, they really are. Give me a cigarette. He wasn't at work Monday. Ethel said he was over in the Russian sector. He hasn't been in the office all week. The only thing I've heard from him is this." I handed him the memo. "He's sending me to the Meidling Sanatorium. They need a bookkeeper. The bastard. The absolute bastard."

Johann blew a smoke ring leisurely at the ceiling, and commented, "It's an assignment."

"It's a temporary job. At a TB sanatorium."

"The Meidling is not so bad. I spend a lot of time there these days."

"Your 'cousin' Alexis?"

He smiled. "A distant cousin. Yes."

"Socializing, while I'll be stuck in a stuffy back room over a pile of books."

"Really, I am ashamed of you, Alice. Was it not you who told me that he who controls the books controls the world? There are things going on at the Meidling. You may be able to find out more than I, with your 'nothing but books.'" He ordered us another round.

"What sort of things? What *are* you working on there?"

He shrugged. "Many things. Money, which washes around the Meidling like water. And people. They come and they go, and many of them have no business to be there. Very interesting. Very mixed. Vienna society in a nutshell, but everyone is coughing. Dying. Very fin de siècle. Wait until you see Mademoiselle d'Antin's Sunday brunch. Marvelous champagne cocktails. You'll have to buy yourself a new cocktail frock. Wine colored, please. No lace. No more lace!"

"She'll never invite me. I'm a bookkeeper."

"Who is an Elliot of Minto."

"Distantly."

"Your father is an Honourable, is he not? That is sufficient. You will be invited. They are all snobs, there, here, at the office." A pang shot through me—that the real reason Ron had pursued me? "Mademoiselle invites everyone, even the orderlies. You will not believe them—rough characters, my dear—more suitable for the penitentiary than for the Meidling. And Mrs.

Pugh holds Thursday afternoon teas. Gossip and parading the young Paula, her niece, who is the loveliest thing one ever saw outside a fairy tale. She is waiting desperately for her Prince Charming to come and set her free from the castle and the dragon. The soft-scented, wide-lapped, lizardlipped, fringe-topped, Devon dragon Mrs. Pugh." I choked on my drink, laughing. "That's better."

"Ron's just trying to get rid of me," I said, after I calmed down. "He thinks this is the easiest way out."

"Perhaps." Johann reached over and grabbed my chin. "Stop crying. Listen to me. You want our American ally to want you, to desire you, to love you? Prove your independence. That's what they really worship, all of them. So. Take this assignment—"

"I have no choice but to take it."

"Take this assignment and do it well. Do the books. And look. I tell you, there is something going on at the Meidling. My nose knows. We will help each other. Discreetly. You will discover something, be something. You will earn Mr. Conroy's respect. And perhaps his desire, it will come back to you. And if it does not—you will have done something worthwhile."

So I went to work at the Meidling. Some parts of it were lovely. My office had a large window and two doors, one leading to the CFO's office (Herr Laurens Hoffner), the other to the front office, where Sissy and Kristen typed, talked, and smoked endless cigarettes. The director, Willy Tressler, had his own office, his own assistant, and his own secretary across the way, far from any actual work.

Some parts were worse: My embezzling predecessor, Herr Weber, had left nothing but wreckage behind. I don't know if you have ever tried to recreate accounts from miscellaneous scraps of paper, receipts, cheque counter-foils, et cetera, but it is miserable work. CFO Hoffner was deeply apologetic.

"I know it will be a job of infinite difficulty, but we must get things back in order as soon as possible. The Meidling is one of the finest sanatoriums in Europe, and we must, how do you say? Make a restoration. Become fiscally sound again. Return to our standards."

And left me to do a job more suited to an archaeologist than a bookkeeper.

I had so many questions: The orderlies and nurses were on a flat salary, while the administration—Hoffner smiled blandly when I mentioned that their salaries appeared to be on an upwardly sliding scale.

"He who works with his mind earns more than he who works with his hands. This is true everywhere, *nein*?"

"Of course. By the way, Herr Hoffner, what's this about plumbing?"

"Huh?"

"Here, this list under Dr. Groen's name, and Dr. Braun's. And a few

others. Listed under expenses, bonuses. P-L-M-B, P-L-M-B, over and over again. Twenty-four of them in the last two weeks. Are they fixing the pipes as well?" I stopped, because Hoffner was laughing himself sick. "Not plumbing. So, may I ask what it is?"

"It is plombage, not plumbing. It is a surgical procedure for tuberculosis, to collapse the lung. It rests it. Many times it stops the disease altogether."

"You must be joking." He wasn't. "Well, we learn something every day. Thank you." I looked over the list. "There seem to be quite a lot of these procedures..."

"My dear Miss West, that is the decision of the surgeon. And our doctors, they are the finest in Europe. One does not ask the finest surgeon in Europe what he is or is not doing. He does it, and is paid for his services."

"Sounds more like a stud than a surgeon," I muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Sounds like a stunningly good idea." I smiled. He smiled. And I returned to the books.

Of course, my name spread throughout the Meidling as the girl who did not know plumbing from surgery... But Johann was right, and I received invitations to everything. I officially made my debut at Marguerite d'Antin's Sunday brunch, which was heavy on drink and redolent of sex. She talked constantly about her fiancé, Robert, while her hands went up and down an orderly. Any orderly.

"My grandmamma always told me that consumption made people randy," I told Johann a couple of nights later. "Now I've proof."

"Never mind d'Antin. How is the plumbing coming along?"

"Much too much of it. You have never seen so many leaky pipes. Almost everyone has apparently gotten a plumber, from Mademoiselle to the divine Paula. By the way, is her father the Victorian chaplain who roams the halls of Meidling?"

"One and the same. He is the soldier, home from the wars."

"Mmm. He's the dead spit of Coventry Patmore in papa's copy of *The Angel in the House*."

"Really? Well, he has had more than one angel—I hear he has been married more than once."

"So was Patmore."

"Ah, the Victorians. Prunes, prisms, and prurience. And Paula. I cannot believe that she needed a plumber."

"The books say she did. Almost every patient has had a plumbing incident, at least on paper. Including indigent patients, which is interesting, because who gives expensive surgery to the poor?"

"A religious benefactor fulfilling his charitable duty?"

"To Schmidt, Jones, and Martin?"

"Three men went into a hotel..." Johann paused. "I see. Good girl, Alice. Keep on the hunt. I must go. I will be out of town for a few days, but I will be attending Alexis's Theosophy Society meeting on Tuesday. I will see you there."

"Must I?"

"Consider it educational."

"Whatever reality things possess must be looked for in them before or after they have passed like a flash through the material world; but we cannot cognise any such existence directly, so long as we have senseinstruments which bring only material existence into the field of our consciousness."

Alexis Engelhardt, reading from *The Secret Doctrine*. Only the coffee was keeping me awake. Attendance was eclectic. A few doctors, a number of administrators, a scattering of women, including Paula Charthouse (chaperoned by Mrs. Pugh) and a couple of nurses. I came because of Johann, who wasn't there. I'd seen him coming in the Meidling, but he'd turned aside, answering someone, and then disappeared down a hallway. It was a shame: I was wearing a claret-colored cocktail frock, silk, probably from a dyed parachute, but it looked lovely, and no lace.

Alexis's lungs lasted ten minutes. He coughed his way down from the podium and Herr Jungfeld rose to drone on about the Universe as the periodical manifestation of the unknown Absolute Essence.

Drs. Groen, Braun, Muller, and others arrived late, in time for coffee. Mrs. Pugh latched onto Dr. Groen, and I joined Alexis and Paula Charthouse, asking after her health.

Paula smiled weakly. "The illusion of my material existence is being an infernal nuisance tonight."

"Perhaps you should go back to your room and lie down."

"Oh, I am so sick of being in my room, of lying down, of being ill... What I want is to be well, to live, to be strong and active and lovely. Like you."

I glanced around quickly to see who she was talking about.

"The lovely Miss West is certainly an addition to our circle," Alexis said. "But take courage, little Paula. You will get well. You are better than you were. And you are altogether lovely."

She looked at him with large blue eyes in a heart-shaped face in a halo of blonde hair—no wonder all the men were crazy about her. Although it was a bit of a waste on Alexis.

"Ah, Miss West!" Dr. Groen said. "Have you learned any new medical terms lately?" He turned to Mrs. Pugh and said, "You have heard about how Miss West decided that I must be a plumber, not a surgeon."

Mrs. Pugh eyed me from head to foot with a reptilian smile. "That is a lovely frock; I hadn't realized the pay here was sufficient for clerical staff to afford silk."

"I receive a small allowance from my family back in Roxburghshire," I replied. Play that card shamelessly. "Scotland."

"Ah, yes. The seat of the Earl of Minto. I saw that you are related. Distantly, of course. I always check DeBrett's. There are so many poseurs in Vienna, especially since the war has ended. Welcome, Miss West, to the Meidling." Then she turned to Paula, "We must leave now. It is late. You need to rest."

"The poor child," Dr. Groen said, watching them leave. "A long struggle with the disease. But we are winning. Someday she will have a normal life."

"I believe she would prefer a Cinderella's life with Prince Charming."

"Very true. Who will it be? You, Alexis?" Alexis blushed. "No."

"It won't be a patient," I said. "She has been in sanatoriums all her life. Whoever will be her Prince Charming will not spit blood." The gentlemen winced at my crudeness. "It will be someone distinguished, chivalrous, strong, true—after all, there is no more certain way of winning a woman's heart than to save her life." I gave Dr. Groen the admiring look that always charmed Uncle Minto. "All women are romantics at heart."

The doctor bowed, and left smiling.

"You are discerning," Alexis said. "He wants to marry *die schöne* Paula with all his heart. But first she must be cured."

"Why wait that long?" I asked. "I would think it better to let her have some fun before she dies."

I'd already made a list of names and dates of "plmb" procedures, and I began to cross-check them against the actual patient files. But when Herr Hoffner, who had so far been cooperative and even complimentary, found me looking through Paula Charthouse's file, he snatched it out of my hands.

"What are you doing with this?"

"I'm double-checking the procedures listed against her actual file. To make sure the billing is accurate. And the receipts."

"Why would you question that?"

"Because. I'm an accountant, and that's what accountants do. We doublecheck, especially when it's a matter of significant bonuses based on expensive procedures—"

"I have told you that our surgeons are the best in Europe. All of these procedures were approved, completed, done. I must ask that you cease this waste of time and energy and return to the job for which you were hired. Or is this a matter of personal animosity toward Drs. Groen, Braun, and others?"

"Not at all, I am just trying to be thorough—"

"And I appreciate your dedication. However, patient files are none of your business. They are private. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

Early that evening, after everyone had gone, I sat in the midst of my archaeological digs and considered. The bookkeeper had vanished. Certain records had been destroyed, but others had been left intact—such as the plumbing list. But what if there had been no embezzlement? What if it was just that, the war over, the Nazis gone, money had to be accounted for? Money stolen, money wasted, money pocketed, money from and for bribes, or dead people, or... But why account for it at all?

Because there were going to be major reviews coming of every major institution in Vienna, which would include an audit.

So a new set of books, carefully prepared and vetted by an outside accountant—an English accountant, supplied by the Americans—would be very useful.

After the Anschluss, the Nazis had put their own personnel at the head of those organizations they didn't simply shut down and loot. But Tressler and Hoffner had been at the Meidling for decades. Why had the Meidling been spared? I'd heard the Nazis were scared out of their uniforms by contagion. And it undoubtedly helped that almost every patient was wealthy enough to pay for their health and safety, in some cases (such as Mademoiselle d'Antin) despite the fact that they were not pure Aryan stock.

And not every resident was or had been a patient. Sissy had gossiped that the Meidling isolation ward saw some interesting "patients" during the war, from Jewish bankers to ladies from the best brothel in Vienna. And of course Mrs. Pugh, that good Devon widow, had ridden out the war comfortably and safely at the Meidling thanks to her consumptive niece. What would she have done if Paula had suddenly been cured? Or married Dr. Groen? And why was he taking so long with his courtship? Of course, it might be... What about the doctors?

I went over the plombage records again and again. Why hadn't I noticed before that Dr. Braun's receipts only began in 1939, Dr. Groen's in 1940? After the Anschluss.

I leaned back in my chair and heard the church bells chime seven. Much past time to go home. Everyone else was gone. I gathered my belongings and went into the front office. On my right were the locked file cabinets, with patient and personnel records. I knew a few things about locks and was about to apply them when a rough voice growled, "*Was machst du hier?*"

It was one of the giant orderlies.

"*Ich war spät arbeiten,*" I stammered out. "*Ich gehe nun in meine Wohnung.*"

"*Du bist—*"

"*Nicht 'du' mich,*" I snapped. "*Verwenden 'Sie' wenn—*"

"Working?" I jumped a mile as another orderly, shorter, thinner, older, came from behind the other. "So late? Alone?"

"I am the bookkeeper. I was just leaving."

The new one was standing between me and the door. His mouth twisted. "What every *mädel* says when she meets a lover. *Nicht wahr?*"

I drew back my shoulders and said, "I am going home now." And I walked, heart pounding, past the first one. The second one reached for my arm and turned me. "Let go of me!"

"I say, what's going on here?" A tall man, with silver temples, silver mustache, lean British face, and a clerical collar. It was Paula's father, the Reverend James Charthouse. He looked at the two orderlies. "What in blazes do you think you're doing? Get your hands off of her! Get out of here!"

The two men jumped away from me, and the second said, "We were only wondering, what she was doing, so late in such a confidential—"

"Nonsense! Who are you? What are your names? I'm going to report you!"

The two men took off running; my rescuer watched them go, jaw clenched. He turned back to me and said, "Don't worry. I know who they are. I'll report them first thing to the personnel manager. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just a little shaken."

"I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself—"

"I know who you are," I said. "I'm Alice West, the bookkeeper."

"I know. I've heard of you from my daughter. I was visiting her, that's why I'm still here."

"Of course."

"You look shaken. Allow me take you to dinner. A good meal and a drink, that's what you need."

Well, you don't turn down a knight, do you? Although I could almost hear Johann saying, "Charming man. But a very convenient rescue." But it was a free meal.

Over dinner, I told him a version of the story of my life, which included the Austrian chap I fell for, but it didn't work out. He told me a great deal about Paula, and of his first wife, who died in childbirth, and his second, who died in an air raid. He also asked how I came to be at the Meidling.

"Through a coordinating agency, a minor branch of the USACA. They sent me over to do the books."

"And how are they?"

"That's confidential."

"Well, all I can say is thank God you're here. Word is there are going to be reviews coming of every institution in Vienna, finances, personnel, the whole ball of wax. I was rather hoping you were the forerunner."

"If I were, it would be terribly indiscreet for me to tell you."

"Well, it may be indiscreet, but Groen and half the surgeons are Nazis. Braun came with the Anschluss. Assigned by Nazi headquarters."

"Has anyone notified the Regional Courts?"

"Oh, yes. First thing I did when I came here. But Nazis or not, surgeons are surgeons. I was told the Meidling was lucky to have them. Hah!"

"Mmm. Speaking of surgeons, did your daughter ever have a plompage treatment?" He looked blankly at me. "Surgery for her tuberculosis."

"No. Thank God we were spared that. Why?"

"Because it appears that a number of patients were listed—wrongly—as having surgical procedures. Now I need to go back and ascertain if they were also charged for those procedures." I looked at him over my wine. "Would you care to help me?" A sudden surge of eagerness took years from his face. "My supervisor—"

"Hoffner or the Americans?"

I ignored that. "—feels that I am wasting valuable time, but it might be important..."

"I am entirely at your service."

I took a sip of wine, a bite of veal. Delicious. Charthouse was watching me, interested, curious, attracted. That was delicious too.

The next day I had lunch with Alexis, which made an interesting contrast. We discussed Mozart, Trollope, Tolstoy, the new Dior collection—there was a little black cocktail dress that Alexis highly recommended, now that he thought I was a Minto with money—and, of course, the sanatorium.

"Everyone is talking about the incident last night. How you were threatened! How the brave English pastor came to your rescue! By the way, have no fear. The two have been fired, thrown out of the Meidling forever. I understand they have been causing problems with the female staff all along, but this incident with you... the final straw."

"Do you know who they were?"

Alexis smiled cattily. "I am sure Mademoiselle d'Antin would know."

I shook my head. "For shame." He snickered. "Tell me, whatever happened to your cousin?" I asked, and watched Alexis shift in his chair. "Wasn't he being treated here as well?"

"Oh, no. He merely came to visit. Did you know him?"

"I met him at a d'Antin Sunday. He told me about the Theosophy lectures."

"Really?" A hesitation. "He attended a couple of them, but he was, sadly, called away a while ago. Back to Strasbourg, where he is working on a fat goose, I have no doubt."

"Perhaps he'll come and visit again."

"I doubt it. If I ever leave here alive, I will never return. Why should he?"

I thought to tell him that I knew my proverbs as well as anyone, but I could hear Johann's voice saying, "Totally untrustworthy, my dear."

God, I missed him.

Sissy told me the names of the two orderlies: Franz Weber and Heinrich Pollard.

My chaplain told me that a significant number of patients, including Paula, had not had surgery, nor been billed for it. And yet money had been passed, from somewhere, to somewhere, at least on paper, for a procedure that had not been done.

He also asked me out to dinner again. I accepted, but for a later date. Never seem too eager.

From the bastard: "You still work here. Regular reports are expected. RC."

From Ethel Toplady: "Nothing from JD. Boss furious. Keep it up."

From Johann: nothing.

That night I went over to Johann's flat after work and let myself in with the spare key. His flat was smaller than mine, one room with a gas ring in the corner, but far more luxurious, with real Turkish carpets, rich drapes, and plummy furniture. I locked the door behind me and searched the place as thoroughly as I knew how. As far as I could tell, nothing was missing. Wherever he had gone, he had taken nothing except the clothes on his back. The plants were almost dead, so I watered them.

I gathered everything with even a scrap of writing on it and took it home, where I sat down with a glass of wine and read. Nothing too embarrassing. Nothing indiscreet. Nothing political. But tucked in his address book, under "W" for West, a sheet of doodles:

"Schmidt, Jones, and Martin went into a..."

[doodled: a transport van, a knife, a swastika, a hammer and sickle.]

And then "Borders? Boarders?"

Separate line: "Scots wha' hae?"

"W" for West, indeed. Oh, where the hell was he? The anonymous note left on my desk said:

"Who do you think you're fooling? You're nothing but a slut and a trollop. Everyone knows you're raking in the money, on your backside and on your back. You deserve whatever you get."

The handwriting did look familiar, but whose was it?

"It is very simple," Mademoiselle d'Antin told me over an afternoon champagne cocktail. Actually, quite a few of them. "They are all mad. Theosophy. Bah! Madame Blavatsky, that woman with the face of a cow. If they had anything else worth the doing, they would do it. Now they are all studying Russian to read Madame in the original. Little Alexis, he is leading it

all. Him and that doctor with the nose of a renard. Now that Germany has lost, they are all fascinated with Russia."

"Why not with Britain? Or America?"

"The Americans are savages," she said, and I nodded sympathetically, thinking of Ron. "The British... ah, well. If they were all like our Père Charthouse. He is very attractive. *C'est sa bouche*. If it were not for Robert, even I... but do not pity me. I have my fiancé, and I have my distractions. It would be better if they were here longer, but... they come and they go and there is no time to train them properly."

"Where do they go?"

She leaned in to me. "Who knows. Pft. Poor Alexis. He is an invert. Like Proust. He looks very like him, does he not? Even worse, he is a Communist. No one knows that. His cousin was an invert as well. I do not think he was a Communist."

She passed out, spilling her drink on the carpet.

Thursday afternoon, Mrs. Pugh's High Tea: Dr. Braun, eating his weight in cream cakes; Dr. Groen, hovering over Paula; Herr Hoffner, pontificating; Mademoiselle d'Antin, looking desperately for something alcoholic; Mrs. Pugh, talking to me.

"She has always borne her treatments bravely."

"I am sure she has. I don't know what she would have done all these years, if it were not for your support."

That satisfied smile. "I have always done my duty. And I love my niece."

"I'm sure you do. You are aware that Dr. Groen is in love with her? Has he always been?"

"Many men have been enamored of my niece. And many women have been attracted to my brother-in-law. He was married, you know, to my sister."

"I assumed that, since Paula is your niece."

"She—Louise—died young."

"In childbirth? Or afterwards?"

"In childbirth. A great tragedy." It burst out, like pus from a wound: "He married her best friend. Very precipitately. Shortly thereafter, she died as well. Drowned in the Irish Sea."

"How tragic. What was her name?"

"Beryl. And then there was Violet. She died in the air raid." Mrs. Pugh was trembling. "There was another... All his wives die young."

"It sounds very sad." And sinister. I had to look into this. I'd had dinner with him the night before. Ethel would pull his dossier for me. But Mrs. Pugh—was she trying to warn me or traduce him?

I was writing up my weekly report that Sunday afternoon when Ron

walked in.

"Where have you been lately?" he asked.

"At work."

"I saw you at the Gasthaus Kopp the other night with that priest. What was that about?"

"Nostalgia. 'Give me just a country cottage, Where the soot of ages falls, And to crown a perfect morning, look! An English vicar calls!' Besides, a priest can be a perfect mine of information. Access to everything."

"So have you gotten anything out of this paragon?"

"Access to patients and religious instruction. In fact, as a licensed Eucharistic lay minister, I will be able to go around with him on Sundays and meet them all."

Actually, that wasn't a bad idea. And suddenly it all fell into place: Schmidt, Jones, and Martin; denazification; the four zones; the orderlies... it all made sense, except Alexis. But I didn't give a damn about him. I wanted to find Johann.

"Alice!"

I jumped. "What?"

Ron was glaring at me. "I asked what the hell do you know about religious instruction?"

"My father is rector at St. Cuthbert's in Hawick."

"Does he do confessions? Charthouse, I mean, not your father."

"I have no idea."

"No, you wouldn't. Hardly your style, is it?"

I tossed him my report and left.

I didn't like being told that Charthouse wasn't my type, style, whatever. Especially because he was, more than Ron would ever be, in background, upbringing, class. So he was older than I. What Ron would never understand—even if I told him, which I would never do—was that with that Victorian-looking pastor came a whole childhood of playing on wet lawns under scudding skies, reading Charlotte Yonge in dark rooms smelling of old books and pipes, singing hymns in a church redolent of candles, damp, and human bodies. Quiet, peaceful, safe. And so dull and stifling that I practically rejoiced when war broke out. How was I to know what I'd see, hear, do? I could never go back.

But Charthouse had a husky voice, gentle hands, and a passion that would surprise only those who believe that Englishmen are their illusion. Being with him was like balm in Gilead.

Of course, there were those wives.

What was I going to do with him?

Oh, the hell with it. I could figure that out after I found Johann.

"Schmidt, Jones, and Martin," I said.

"What was that?" Herr Hoffner asked.

"It's an old joke," I said. "Schmidt, Jones, and Martin? Three men went into a hotel—" I told the clean version, with the puzzle.

"I have heard that before. Very clever."

"By the way, isn't there anything we can do about the orderlies?"

"What do you mean?"

"The turnover. It's atrocious. And most of them have no medical background whatsoever—"

"Miss West, we have just gone through the worst war in the history—"

"I'm well aware there's been a war. That's what I mean. There are people lined up five deep to get any job at all, many of them trained medical personnel, who would be happy to begin as an orderly at the Meidling. Instead, you're hiring common toughs who come and go at the drop of a hat."

"If there is a problem, take it up with Herr Bouman. He is in charge of personnel. I have heard no complaints."

"You mean you haven't heard how the patients have to keep everything under lock and key? All the petty thefts? The incidents with female staff?"

"If this is true—" He glared at Sissy, who was snorting. "—obviously we must beef up security."

"You need to hire people who are qualified for the job," I said.

But then, if I was right, they were exactly qualified, just in the wrong place.

"I received a new housekeeper," Charthouse said.

"Received?"

"She said she was sent by the—what was the coordinating agency you mentioned?"

Damn Ron, was what I thought. Putting a spy into Charthouse's house was fairly low. What I said was, "Were you looking for a housekeeper?"

"Well, of course. Everyone is."

"Then they finally found one. Lovely for you. Two questions."

"Yes?"

"First of all, What do you know about Theosophy?"

"I don't think much of it, I'm afraid. And even less of the little group here."

"They seem to take it quite seriously: I heard they're planning to read Blavatsky in the original Russian."

"Hah! She wrote most of her indigestible prose in English."

Well, that opened up another train of thought.

"And your second question?" he asked, almost in my ear.

He did have a sweet mouth... "I was wondering if you could use a

Eucharistic lay minister? Myself? I am licensed, at least I was, in Scotland. My father is a parish priest—"

"Yes, I remember you telling me." The expression on his face was very strange.

"And I thought, as this place is not exactly humming with C of E help..." I waited. "What do you think? I really would love to help out."

"Might I ask why?"

"Does it matter?"

"No," he said, and his eyes glowed like sapphires.

Sunday morning. The isolation ward was as locked and shuttered and barred as an insane asylum, but with more comfortable rooms. At least the walls were painted white, and the beds were soft. It had taken some persuading to get my chaplain to let me accompany him here. To the terrible sound of tubercular coughing, he laid his hands upon them and prayed—"to drive away all sickness of body and spirit"—anointed them—"and restore you to wholeness and strength"—and, when they could receive it, gave them Communion.

The rite, repeated from body to body, soul to soul, was hypnotic, comforting, peaceful. Josef Ahlers; David Hendricks; Kristin Hetzel; name after name, room after room.

Then we came to the indigents: Karl Schmidt was a large German who played mute and looked like he actually needed a bloodletting. Amon Martin wasn't even there. Aaron Jones was unconscious, drugged to keep down his pain. He was also Johann, or rather what was left of him. I nearly cried as Charthouse put his hands on his wasted head and he never even moved.

"I need to leave, now," I whispered out in the hallway.

"But there are three more patients."

"Of course." I didn't dare arouse any suspicion at this point.

"If you need to go and get a breath of fresh air..."

His eyes were sympathetic above his mask. He thought I couldn't handle the ward, the sick, the dying, and I instantly wanted to impress him with my toughness—but Johann's welfare had to come first.

"Just for a moment."

He nodded and I left. I glanced down the hallway. Sister was up at the other end, and the nurse's station was empty, so I used her telephone and dialed the emergency number.

"Yes?" Ron growled.

"Johann is here, in the isolation ward, near death. Send help. *Now.*"

I hung up, my heart pounding, thinking: I'd found Johann. He was alive. I had found him. He was alive.

Charthouse came out of the last room and saw me standing by the nurse's station.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much."

"Shall we wash our hands and go to dinner?"

"In a few minutes." I had no intention of going anywhere until I was sure that Johann would be safe. "I must ask you something. When I first came to work here, Mademoiselle d'Antin said that you had been married twice."

"Ah, a great tragedy, that poor young woman. I feel so sorry for her."

"And you agreed. On the other hand, your sister-in-law took pains to inform me that you have been married four times. Could you please tell me how many times you've been married?"

He blushed like fire. "Must we really speak of this now?"

"It's vital that I know. After all that has happened between us..."

He began a long, stammering explanation that was interrupted when Dr. Groen burst in through the doors of the isolation ward, calling to Sister to help him move one of the patients at once.

"Quick," I hissed at Charthouse. "Stop him. Distract him. Anything. *Now!*"

Bless him, he turned on his heel immediately and went over to Groen.

"I say, is there anything wrong? Is there anything I can do? I've got a bit of medical training, you know."

"Nothing," Dr. Groen snapped. "This is an emergency." I had maneuvered myself in front of Johann's room. "You must move! *Now!*"

"But what kind of emergency? I was just in there," Charthouse continued.

Groen lunged at and past me, with enough violence so that I could make it look as if he had knocked me down. Charthouse grabbed him, turned him, and hit him hard in the jaw—a punch straight out of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Groen slammed into the wall as the police swarmed in, Ron bringing up the rear.

"Johann's in there," I told Ron as a couple of officers got control of Groen and Charthouse helped me to my feet. "He's almost dead."

"Are you all right?" Charthouse asked me.

"Don't worry, we'll get him out of here at once," Ron said. "The AKH should be safe. I'll put a guard on him."

"Are you all right?" Charthouse repeated.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"Perfectly well." His blue eyes bored into mine. "Johann? Is he your Austrian chap?"

"No. We work together, and we're friends, but that's all. Why are you smiling?"

"Because."

Johann was close to dying for a couple of days, and he was weak as water for almost a month. I was the one who explained to Ron that Dr. Groen (at least) had been using the sanatorium as an employer of ex-Nazis

(such as the orderlies) and the isolation ward as a place to hide them—and from which to transport them—when and if the denazification sections caught up with them.

"It was a handy way to get rid of people who were a problem. Like Johann."

"I knew you could do it," Johann breathed.

"Mmm. Did you know anything about this?" Ron asked Johann.

Johann shook his head. "I had a suspicion. But I was looking into the Communists. Alexis. And his friends. They.." he ran out of breath and looked at me, so I took over.

"They've been using the Theosophical Society meetings to transmit information to one another and the Russians. And using the impenetrable works of Madame Blavatsky as a code—"

"Which I'd almost broken," Johann gasped his boast. "But then Alexis found out. Told Groen. Something or other." Johann gave a weak smile. "He performed an unhygienic plombage on me. With a knife."

"In other words, he stabbed Johann," I continued, "and put him in the isolation ward. Drugged, starved, and left to become just another tubercular corpse."

"But all is well. Thanks to Alice." Johann kissed my hand and went back to sleep.

"Another damn thing to investigate," Ron growled, but quietly, so as not to disturb Johann.

Dr. Groen and Dr. Braun were put into custody, half the orderlies were arrested, and the other half vanished like rats off a ship. Alexis and many others were taken in custody and interrogated at length. Three Russian agents were quickly liquidated. Chief Inspector Shchapov was furious.

Of course, anyone who had attended the society meetings was questioned. Even Mrs. Pugh, who disdainfully described the Theosophical Society as "Absolute rubbish. The only reason I attended was to be civil." She held her own until Dr. Groen's name was brought up, and then went into hysterics before she admitted that she'd been bribing him to be her personal physician throughout the war.

"I believe she's telling the truth," I told Ron. "But don't worry. I'll keep an eye on her."

"You're not needed at the sanatorium anymore."

"I know that. She's going to be my sister-in-law."

"What?"

"James and I are going to be married."

"James?"

"James Charthouse. The chaplain."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Not at all."

"You do know he's been married before."

"Four times. Three deaths, one divorce. Ethel ran a background check on him for me. I've already updated his dossier."

"Marry—Why?"

"Because. He amuses me. He knows when to do what he's told. And he is rather attractive."

"That's ridiculous! Insane!" he bellowed. He grabbed me by the arms and asked, "What do you want? A raise? A promotion? A ring?"

"Respect, a raise, and a rise might be nice. James at least provides respect."

"He might kill you. My God, *I* could kill you."

"But it would be the perfect cover. As a chaplain's wife, I could go anywhere, do anything, ask all sorts of questions—it's ideal. I thought you'd be pleased."

"If you think I won't call your bluff..."

And that's how I got my first case.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY JOSEPH GOODRICH

FREDERICK IRVING ANDERSON | 12550 words



In another life, in another city, I once worked in an American Express mail room, collating documents pertaining to other people's money. It was a simple, tedious job that required little more than knowledge of the alphabet and the ability to count to ten. If you'd mastered those skills and showed up on time, you were assured of plentiful (if not particularly profitable) work. It wasn't a bad job for a writer, and I did it on-and-off for a number of years.

While I sorted and assembled, I listened to audiobooks—a *lot* of audiobooks. Novels, short stories, biographies, history, old radio shows, anything and everything that would help me through the workday. I favored mysteries and revisited old favorites like *The Valley of Fear*, *The Confidential Agent*, and *Red Harvest*. Even better, I made some new discoveries.

One very pleasant surprise was part of an audio collection titled *More of the Greatest Mysteries of All Time*. The venerable Otto Penzler had chosen the stories, classics by such authors as Vincent Starrett, Ruth Rendell, and Harlan Ellison, whose work I knew and admired. But Frederick Irving Anderson? Who was he? The name was vaguely familiar. I'd never read him, I knew that much. I also know that "The Infallible Godahl" captivated me from its first sentence to its last.

As one enamored of New York City and its history, I relish the vision of preWorld-War-I era Gotham that Anderson's stories offer. He allows us to visit a vanished world and captures a long-lost decorousness of language and behavior. Fans of Jack Finney's *Time and Again* and Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* will delight in Anderson's settings, which encompass private clubs,

wellappointed drawing rooms, and lavish apartment hotels, peopled by society lionesses, explorers of exotic climes, and choleric plutocrats brandishing horsewhips.

In other ways, Anderson's NYC is not so different from the one I live in. It's a city in transition, dynamic and tumultuous. Construction is booming; the reader will note that the Grand Central Terminal is being built in "The Infallible Godahl." Science and technology are transforming the social and economic landscape. Rich and poor, respectable citizens and pocket-picking thieves share the bustling streets. Then as now, New York City was a place to make money—or steal it.

Anderson's protagonist is the highly successful author Oliver Armiston, who owes his fame and fortune to his wildly popular tales about a master criminal named Godahl. He's never been caught, this Godahl, or even suspected of a crime; he's a super-villain after the Moriarty fashion, though he's a far more dashing figure than Holmes' nemesis. It's no mistake that such a resourceful, clever, and powerful character's name begins with the letters G, O, and D. There's something distinctly God-like about Godahl.

Armiston's confidence—or egotism, if you want to judge him harshly—borders on the God-like as well, but he's in for a rude awakening; a possible subtitle for the story could be "Or, The Author's Nightmare." The blade of his ingenuity is turned against him, and Armiston learns the truth of Proverbs, 16:18: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."

Those with a taste for metafiction will be intrigued by the way art and life intermingle in "The Infallible Godahl." Modernist ideas of narrative were beginning to infiltrate the world of popular fiction. Joyce's *Dubliners* was published the same year—1914—as the collected Godahl stories. New ideas were in the air, whether one wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* or *The Little Review*.

According to *The Saint James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*, Frederick Irving Anderson was born in Aurora, Illinois in 1877 and died in 1947. A former journalist who'd worked for newspapers in Illinois and NYC, Anderson turned to freelance writing in 1910. Although many of his stories were published in the slick magazines of the era, he's relatively unknown today. *The Saint James Guide* claims that

Anderson was probably the only detective story writer to capture successfully the pre-Titanic syndrome of ultra-sophistication mingled with vulgarity, refinement with crude greed, hedonism with a zest for cultural color. He brought a certain Stevensonian glamour and fairytale quality into even police routine.

Anderson wrote five other stories featuring that criminal genius, that dapper rogue Godahl—too few, for this fan, but we're lucky to have them.

For Godahl is not only infallible... he's irresistible.

THE INFALLIBLE GODAHL

Oliver Armiston never was much of a sportsman with a rod or gun—though he could do fancy work with a pistol in a shooting gallery. He had, however, one game from which he derived the utmost satisfaction. Whenever he went traveling, which was often, he invariably caught his trains by the tip of the tail, so to speak, and hung on till he could climb aboard. In other words he believed in close connections. He had a theory that more valuable dollars-and-cents time and good animal heat are wasted warming seats in stations waiting for trains than by missing them. The sum of joy to his methodical mind was to halt the slamming gates at the last fraction of the last second with majestic upraised hand, and to stroll aboard his parlor car with studied deliberation, while the train crew were gnashing their teeth in rage and swearing to get even with the gateman for letting him through.

Yet Mr. Armiston never missed a train. A good many of them tried to miss him, but none ever succeeded. He reckoned time and distance so nicely that it really seemed as if his trains had nothing else half so important as waiting until Mr. Oliver Armiston got aboard.

On this particular June day he was due in New Haven at two. If he failed to get there at two o'clock he could very easily arrive at three. But an hour is sixty minutes, and a minute is sixty seconds; and, further, Mr. Armiston, having passed his word that he would be there at two o'clock, surely would be.

On this particular day, by the time Armiston finally got to the Grand Central the train looked like an odds-on favorite. In the first place he was still in his bed at an hour when another and less experienced traveler would have been watching the clock in the station waiting room. In the second place, after kissing his wife in that absent-minded manner characteristic of true love, he became tangled in a Broadway traffic crush at the first corner. Scarcely was he extricated from this when he ran into a Socialist mass meeting at Union Square. It was due only to the wits of his chauffeur that the taxicab was extricated with very little damage to the surrounding human scenery. But our man of method did not fret. Instead he buried himself in his book, a treatise on Cause and Effect, which at that moment was lulling him with soothing sentiment:

"There is no such thing as accident. The so-called accidents of everyday life are due to the preordained action of correlated causes, which is inevitable and over which man has no control."

This was comforting, but not much to the point, when Oliver Armiston looked up and discovered he had reached Twenty-third Street and had come to a halt. A sixty-foot truck, with an underslung burden consisting of a sixty-ton steel girder, had at this point suddenly developed weakness in its off hindwheel and settled down on the pavement across the right of way like a tired elephant. This, of course, was not an accident. It was due to a weakness in the construction of that wheel—a weakness that had from the beginning been destined to block streetcars and taxicabs at this particular spot at this particular hour.

Mr. Armiston dismounted and walked a block. Here he hailed a second taxicab and soon was spinning north again at a fair speed, albeit the extensive building operations in Fourth Avenue had made the street wellnigh impassable.

The roughness of the pavement merely shook up his digestive apparatus and gave it zest for the fine luncheon he was promising himself the minute he stepped aboard his train. His new chauffeur got lost three times in the maze of traffic about the Grand Central Station. This, however, was only human, seeing that the railroad company changed the map of 42nd Street every twenty-four hours during the course of the building of its new terminal.

Mr. Armiston at length stepped from his taxicab, gave his grip to a porter and paid the driver from a huge roll of bills. This same roll was no sooner transferred back to his pocket than a nimble-fingered pickpocket removed it. This again was not an accident. That pickpocket had been waiting there for the last hour for that roll of bills. It was preordained, inevitable. And Oliver Armiston had just thirty seconds to catch his train by the tail and climb aboard. He smiled contentedly to himself.

It was not until he called for his ticket that he discovered his loss. For a full precious second he gazed at the hand that came away empty from his money pocket, and then:

"I find I left my purse at home," he said with a grand air he knew how to assume on occasions. "My name is Mr. Oliver Armiston."

Now Oliver Armiston was a name to conjure with.

"I don't doubt it," said the ticket agent dryly. "Mr. Andrew Carnegie was here yesterday begging carfare to 125th Street, and Mr. John D. Rockefeller quite frequently drops in and leaves his dollar watch in hock. Next!"

And the ticket agent glared at the man blocking the impatient line and told him to move on.

Armiston flushed crimson. He glanced at the clock. For once in his life he was about to experience that awful feeling of missing his train. For once in his life he was about to be robbed of that delicious sensation of hypnotizing the gatekeeper and walking majestically down that train platform that extends northward under the train-shed a considerable part of the distance

toward Yonkers. Twenty seconds! Armiston turned round, still holding his ground, and glared concentrated malice at the man next in line. That man was in a hurry. In his hand he held a bundle of bills. For a second the thief-instinct that is latent in us all suggested itself to Armiston. There within reach of his hand was the money, the precious paltry dollar bills that stood between him and his train. It scared him to discover that he, an upright and honored citizen, was almost in the act of grabbing them like a common pickpocket.

Then a truly remarkable thing happened. The man thrust his handful of bills at Armiston.

"The only way I can raise this blockade is to bribe you," he said, returning Armiston's glare. "Here—take what you want—and give the rest of us a chance."

With the alacrity of a blind beggar miraculously cured by the sight of much money Armiston grabbed the handful, extracted what he needed for his ticket, and thrust the rest back into the waiting hand of his unknown benefactor. He caught the gate by a hair. So did his unknown friend. Together they walked down the platform, each matching the other's leisurely pace with his own. They might have been two potentates, so deliberately did they catch this train. Armiston would have liked very much to thank this person, but the other presented so forbidding an exterior that it was hard to find a point of attack. By force of habit Armiston boarded the parlor car, quite forgetting he did not have money for a seat.

So did the other. The unknown thrust a bill at the porter. "Get me two chairs," he said. "One is for this gentleman."

Once inside and settled, Armiston renewed his efforts to thank this strange person. That person took a card from his pocket and handed it to Armiston.

"Don't run away with the foolish idea," he said tartly, "that I have done you a service willingly. You were making me miss my train, and I took this means of bribing you to get you out of my way. That is all, sir. At your leisure you may send me your check for the trifle."

"A most extraordinary person!" said Armiston to himself. "Let me give you my card," he said to the other. "As to the service rendered, you are welcome to your own ideas on that. For my part I am very grateful."

The unknown took the proffered card and thrust it in his waistcoat pocket without glancing at it. He swung his chair round and opened a magazine, displaying a pair of broad unneighborly shoulders. This was rather disconcerting to Armiston, who was accustomed to have his card act as an Open sesame!

"Damn his impudence!" he said to himself. "He takes me for a mendicant. I'll make copy of him!"

This was the popular author's way of getting even with those who

offended his tender sensibilities.

Two things worried Armiston: One was his luncheon—or rather the absense of it; and the other was his neighbor. This neighbor, now that Armiston had a chance to study him, was a young man, well set up. He had a fine bronzed face that was not half so surly as his manner. He was now buried up to his ears in a magazine, oblivious of everything about him, even the dining-car porter, who strode down the aisle and announced the first call to lunch in the dining car.

"I wonder what the fellow is reading," said Armiston to himself. He peeped over the man's shoulder, and was interested at once, for the stranger was reading a copy of a magazine called by the vulgar "The Whited Sepulcher." It was the pride of this magazine that no man on earth could read it without the aid of a dictionary. Yet this person seemed to be enthralled. And what was more to the point, and vastly pleasing to Armiston, the man was at that moment engrossed in one of Armiston's own effusions. It was one of his crime stories that had won him praise and lucre. It concerned the Infallible Godahl.

These stories were pure reason incarnate in the person of a scientific thief. The plot was invariably so logical that it seemed more like the output of some machine than of a human mind. Of course the plots were impossible, because the fiction thief had to be an incredible genius to carry out the details. But nevertheless they were highly entertaining, fascinating and dramatic at one and the same time.

And this individual read the story through without winking an eyelash—as though the mental effort cost him nothing—and then, to Armiston's delight, turned back to the beginning and read it again. The author threw out his chest and shot his cuffs. It was not often that such unconscious tribute fell to his lot. He took the card of his unknown benefactor. It read:

MR. J. BORDEN BENSON
THE TOWERS NEW YORK CITY

"Humph!" snorted Armiston. "An aristocrat—and a snob too!"

At this moment the aristocrat turned in his chair and handed the magazine to his companion. All his bad humor was gone.

"Are you familiar," he asked, "with this man Armiston's work? I mean these scientific thief stories that are running now."

"Ye—yes. Oh, yes," sputtered Armiston, hastily putting the other's card away. "I—in fact, you know—I take them every morning before breakfast."

In a way this was the truth, for Armiston always began his day's writing before breakfasting.

Mr. Benson smiled—a very fine smile at once boyish and sophisticated.

"Rather a heavy diet early in the morning, I should say," he replied. "Have you read this last one then?"

"Oh, yes," said the delighted author.

"What do you think of it?" asked Benson.

The author puckered his lips.

"It is on a par with the others," he said.

"Yes," said Benson thoughtfully. "I should say the same thing. And when we have said that there is nothing left to say. They are truly a remarkable product. Quite unique, you know. And yet," he said, frowning at Armiston, "I believe that this man Armiston is to be ranked as the most dangerous man in the world today."

"Oh, I say—" began Armiston. But he checked himself, chuckling. He was very glad Mr. Benson had not looked at his card.

"I mean it," said the other decidedly. "And you think so yourself, I fully believe. No thinking man could do otherwise."

"In just what way? I must confess I have never thought of his work as anything but pure invention."

It was truly delicious. Armiston would certainly make copy of this person.

"I will grant," said Benson, "that there is not a thief in the world today clever enough—brainy enough—to take advantage of the suggestions put forth in these stories. But someday there will arise a man to whom they will be as simple as an ordinary blueprint, and he will profit accordingly. This magazine, by printing these stories, is merely furnishing him with his tools, showing him how to work. And the worst of it is—"

"Just a minute," said the author. "Agreeing for the moment that these stories will be the tools of Armiston's hero in real life someday, how about the popular magazines? They print ten such stories to one of these by Armiston."

"Ah, my friend," said Benson, "you forget one thing: The popular magazines deal with real life—the possible, the usual. And in that very thing they protect the public against sharpers, by exposing the methods of those same sharpers. But the Armiston—no. Much as I enjoy him as an intellectual treat, I am afraid—"

He didn't finish his sentence. Instead he fell to shaking his head, as though in amazement at the devilish ingenuity of the author under discussion.

"I am certainly delighted," thought that author, "that my disagreeable benefactor did not have the good grace to look at my card. This is really most entertaining." And then aloud, and treading on thin ice: "I should be very glad to tell Oliver what you say and see what he has to say about it."

Benson's face broke into a wreath of wrinkles:

"Do you know him? Well, I declare! That is a privilege. I heartily wish you would tell him."

"Would you like to meet him? I am under obligation to you. I can arrange a little dinner for a few of us."

"No," said Benson, shaking his head; "I would rather go on reading him without knowing him. Authors are so disappointing in real life. He may be some puny, anemic little half-portion, with dirty fingernails and all the rest that goes with genius. No offense to your friend! Besides, I am afraid I might quarrel with him."

"Last call for lunch in the dinin' cy—yah—aa," sang the porter. Armiston was looking at his fingernails as the porter passed. They were manicured once a day.

"Come lunch with me," said Benson heartily. "I should be pleased to have you as my guest. I apologize for being rude to you at the ticket window, but I did want to catch this train mighty bad."

Armiston laughed. "Well, you have paid my carfare," he said, "and I won't deny I am hungry enough to eat a hundred-and-ten-pound rail. I will let you buy me a meal, being penniless."

Benson arose, and as he drew out his handkerchief the card Armiston had given him fluttered into that worthy's lap. Armiston closed his hand over it, chuckling again. Fate had given him the chance of preserving his incognito with this person as long as he wished. It would be a rare treat to get him ranting again about the author Armiston.

But Armiston's host did not rant against his favorite author. In fact he was so enthusiastic over that man's genius that the same qualities which he decried as a danger to society in his opinion only added luster to the work. Benson asked his guest innumerable questions as to the personal qualities of his ideal, and Armiston shamelessly constructed a truly remarkable person. The other listened entranced.

"No, I don't want to know him," he said. "In the first place I haven't the time, and in the second I'd be sure to start a row. And then there is another thing: If he is half the man I take him to be from what you say, he wouldn't stand for people fawning on him and telling him what a wonder he is. That's about what I should be doing, I am afraid."

"Oh," said Armiston, "he isn't so bad as that. He is a—well, a sensible chap, with clean fingernails and all that, you know, and he gets a haircut once every three weeks, the same as the rest of us."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Mr.—er.."

Benson fell to chuckling.

"By gad," he said, "here we have been talking with each other for an hour, and I haven't so much as taken a squint at your card to see who you are!"

He searched for the card Armiston had given him.

"Call it Brown," said Armiston, lying gorgeously and with a feeling of utmost righteousness. "Martin Brown, single, read-and-write, color white, laced shoes and derby hat, as the police say."

"All right, Mr. Brown; glad to know you. We will have some cigars. You have no idea how much you interest me, Mr. Brown. How much does Armiston get for his stories?"

"Every word he writes brings him the price of a good cigar. I should say he makes forty thousand a year."

"Humph! That is better than Godahl, his star creation, could bag as a thief, I imagine, let alone the danger of getting snipped with a pistol ball on a venture."

Armiston puffed up his chest and shot his cuffs again.

"How does he get his plots?"

Armiston knitted his ponderous brows. "There's the rub," he said. "You can talk about so-and-so much a word until you are deaf, dumb and blind. But, after all, it isn't the number of words or how they are strung together that makes a story. It is the idea. And ideas are scarce."

"I have an idea that I have always wanted to have Armiston get hold of, just to see what he could do with it. If you will pardon me, to my way of thinking the really important thing isn't the ideas, but how to work out the details."

"What's your idea?" asked Armiston hastily. He was not averse to appropriating anything he encountered in real life and dressing it up to suit his taste. "I'll pass it on to Armiston, if you say so."

"Will you? That's capital. To begin with," Mr. Benson said as he twirled his brandy glass with long, lean, silky fingers—a hand Armiston thought he would not like to have handle him in a rage—"to begin with, Godahl, this thief, is not an ordinary thief, he is a high-brow. He has made some big hauls. He must be a very rich man now—eh? You see that he is quite real to me. By this time, I should say, Godahl has acquired such a fortune that thieving for mere money is no longer an object. What does he do? Sit down and live on his income? Not much. He is a person of refined tastes with an eye for the esthetic. He desires art objects, rare porcelains, a gem of rare cut or color set by Benvenuto Cellini, a Leonardo da Vinci—did Godahl steal the Mona Lisa, by the way? He is the most likely person I can think of—or perhaps a Gutenberg Bible. Treasures, things of exquisite beauty to look at, to enjoy in secret, not to show to other people. That is the natural development of this man Godahl, eh?"

"Splendid!" exclaimed Armiston, his enthusiasm getting the better of him.

"Have you ever heard of Mrs. Billy Wentworth?" asked Benson.

"Indeed, I know her well," said Armiston, his guard down.

"Then you must surely have seen her white ruby?"

"White ruby! I never heard of such a thing. A white ruby?"

"Exactly. That's just the point. Neither have I. But if Godahl heard of a white ruby the chances are he would possess it—especially if it were the only one of its kind in the world."

"God! I do believe he would, from what I know of him."

"And especially," went on Benson, "under the circumstances. You know the Wentworths have been round a good deal. They haven't been overscrupulous in getting things they wanted. Now Mrs. Wentworth—but before I go on with this weird tale I want you to understand me. It is pure fiction—an idea for Armiston and his wonderful Godahl. I am merely suggesting the Wentworths as fictitious characters."

"I understand," said Armiston.

"Mrs. Wentworth might very well possess this white ruby. Let us say she stole it from some potentate's household in the Straits Settlements. She gained admittance by means of the official position of her husband. They can't accuse her of theft. All they can do is to steal the gem back from her. It is a sacred stone of course. They always are in fiction stories. And the usual tribe of jugglers, rug-peddlers, and so on—all disguised, you understand—have followed her to America, seeking a chance, not on her life, not to commit violence of any kind, but to steal that stone.

"She can't wear it," went on Benson. "All she can do is to hide it away in some safe place. What is a safe place? Not a bank. Godahl could crack a bank with his little finger. So might those East Indian fellows, laboring under the call of religion. Not in a safe. That would be folly."

"How then?" put in Armiston eagerly.

"Ah, there you are! That's for Godahl to find out. He knows, let us say, that these foreigners in one way or another have turned Mrs. Wentworth's apartments upsidedown. They haven't found anything. He knows that she keeps that white ruby in that house. Where is it? Ask Godahl. Do you see the point? Has Godahl ever cracked a nut like that? No. Here he must be the cleverest detective in the world and the cleverest thief at the same time. Before he can begin thieving he must make his blueprints.

"When I read Armiston," continued Benson, "that is the kind of problem that springs up in my mind. I am always trying to think of some knot this wonderful thief would have to employ his best powers to unravel. I think of some weird situation like this one. I say to myself: 'Good! I will write that. I will be as famous as Armiston. I will create another Godahl.' But," he said with a wave of his hands, "what is the result? I tie the knot, but I can't untie it. The trouble is, I am not a Godahl. And this man Armiston, as I read him, is Godahl. He must be, or else Godahl could not be made to do the wonderful things he does. Hello! New Haven already? Mighty sorry to have you go, old chap. Great pleasure. When you get to town let me know. Maybe I will consent to meet Armiston."

Armiston's first care on returning to New York was to remember the providential loan by which he had been able to keep clean his record of never missing a train. He counted out the sum in bills, wrote a polite note, signed it "Martin Brown," and dispatched it by messenger boy to J. Borden Benson,

The Towers. The Towers, the address Mr. Benson's card bore, is an ultra-fashionable apartment hotel in lower Fifth Avenue. It maintains all the pomp and solemnity of an English ducal castle. Armiston remembered having on a remote occasion taken dinner there with a friend, and the recollection always gave him a chill. It was like dining among ghosts of kings, so grand and funereal was the air that pervaded everything.

Armiston, who could not forbear curiosity as to his queer benefactor, took occasion to look him up in the Blue Book and the Club Directory, and found that J. Borden Benson was quite some personage, several lines being devoted to him. This was extremely pleasing. Armiston had been thinking of that white-ruby yarn. It appealed to his sense of the dramatic. He would work it up in his best style, and on publication have a fine laugh on Benson by sending him an autographed copy and thus waking that gentleman up to the fact that it really had been the great Armiston in person he had befriended and entertained. What a joke it would be on Benson, thought the author; not without an intermixture of personal vanity, for even a genius such as he was not blind to flattery properly applied, and Benson unknowingly had laid it on thick.

"And, by gad," thought the author, "I will use the Wentworths as the main characters, as the victims of Godah! They are just the people to fit into such a romance. Benson put money in my pocket, though he didn't suspect it. Lucky he didn't know what shifts we popular authors are put to for plots."

Suiting the action to the word, Armiston and his wife accepted the next invitation they received from the Wentworths.

Mrs. Wentworth, be it understood, was a lion hunter. She was forever trying to gather about her such celebrities as Armiston the author, Brackens the painter, Johanssen the explorer, and others. Armiston had always withstood her wiles. He always had some excuse to keep him away from her gorgeous table, where she exhibited her lions to her simpering friends.

There were many undesirables sitting at the table, idle-rich youths, girls of the fast hunting set, and so on, and they all gravely shook the great author by the hand and told him what a wonderful man he was. As for Mrs. Wentworth, she was too highly elated at her success in roping him for sane speech, and she fluttered about him like a hysterical bridesmaid. But, Armiston noted with relief, one of his pals was there—Johanssen. Over cigars and cognac he managed to buttonhole the explorer.

"Johanssen," he said, "you have been everywhere."

"You are mistaken there," said Johanssen. "I have never before tonight been north of 59th Street in New York."

"Yes, but you have been in Java and Ceylon and the Settlements. Tell me, have you ever heard of such a thing as a white ruby?"

The explorer narrowed his eyes to a slit and looked queerly at his questioner. "That's a queer question," he said in a low voice, "to ask in this

house."

Armiston felt his pulse quicken. "Why?" he asked, assuming an air of surprised innocence.

"If you don't know," said the explorer shortly, "I certainly will not enlighten you."

"All right; as you please. But you haven't answered my question yet. Have you ever heard of a white ruby?"

"I don't mind telling you that I have heard of such a thing—that is, I have heard there is a ruby in existence that is called the white ruby. It isn't really white, you know; it has a purplish tinge. But the old heathen who rightly owns it likes to call it white, just as he likes to call his blue and gray elephants white."

"Who owns it?" asked Armiston, trying his best to make his voice sound natural. To find in this manner that there was some parallel for the mystical white ruby of which Benson had told him appealed strongly to his superdeveloped dramatic sense. He was now as keen on the scent as a hound.

Johanssen took to drumming on the tablecloth. He smiled to himself and his eyes glowed. Then he turned and looked sharply at his questioner.

"I suppose," he said, "that all things are grist to a man of your trade. If you are thinking of building a story round a white ruby I can think of nothing more fascinating. But, Armiston," he said, suddenly altering his tone and almost whispering, "if you are on the track of *the* white ruby let me advise you now to call off your dogs and keep your throat whole. I think I am a brave man. I have shot tigers at ten paces—held my fire purposely to see how charmed a life I really did bear. I have been charged by mad rhinos and by wounded buffaloes, have walked across a clearing where the air was being punctured with bullets as thick as holes in a mosquito screen. But," he said, laying his hand on Armiston's arm, "I have never had the nerve to hunt the white ruby."

"Capital!" exclaimed the author.

"Capital, yes, for a man who earns his bread and gets his excitement by sitting at a typewriter and dreaming about these things. But take my word for it, it isn't capital for a man who gets his excitement by doing this thing. Hands off, my friend!"

"It really does exist then?"

Johanssen puckered his lips. "So they say," he said.

"What's it worth?"

"Worth? What do you mean by worth? Dollars and cents? What is your child worth to you? A million, a billion—how much? Tell me. No, you can't. Well, that's just what this miserable stone is worth to the man who rightfully owns it. Now let's quit talking nonsense. There's Billy Wentworth shooin' the men into the drawing room. I suppose we shall be entertained this evening

by some of the hundred-dollar-a-minute songbirds, as usual. It's amazing what these people will spend for mere vulgar display when there are hundreds of families starving within a mile of this spot!"

Two famous singers sang that night. Armiston did not have much opportunity to look over the house. He was now fully determined to lay the scene of his story in this very house. At leavetaking the sugar-sweet Mrs. Billy Wentworth drew Armiston aside and said:

"It's rather hard on you to ask you to sit through an evening with these people. I will make amends by asking you to come to me some night when we can be by ourselves. Are you interested in rare curios? Yes, we all are. I have some really wonderful things I want you to see. Let us make it next Tuesday, with a little informal dinner, just for ourselves."

Armiston then and there made the lion hunter radiantly happy by accepting her invitation to sit at her board as a family friend instead of as a lion.

As he put his wife into their automobile he turned and looked at the house. It stood opposite Central Park. It was a copy of some French château in gray sandstone, with a barbican, and overhanging towers, and all the rest of it. The windows of the street floor peeped out through deep embrasures and were heavily guarded with iron latticework.

"Godahl will have the very devil of a time breaking in there," he chuckled to himself. Late that night his wife awakened him to find out why he was tossing about so.

"That white ruby has got on my nerves," he said cryptically, and she, thinking he was dreaming, persuaded him to try to sleep again.

Great authors must really live in the flesh, at times at least, the lives of their great characters. Otherwise these great characters would not be so real as they are. Here was Armiston, who had created a superman in the person of Godahl the thief. For ten years he had written nothing else. He had laid the life of Godahl out in squares, thought for him, dreamed about him, set him to new tasks, gone through all sorts of queer adventures with him. And this same Godahl had amply repaid him. He had raised the author from the ranks of struggling amateurs to a position among the most highly paid fiction writers in the United States. He had brought him ease and luxury. Armiston did not need the money anymore. The serial rights telling of the exploits of this Godahl had paid him handsomely. The book of Godahl's adventures had paid him even better, and had furnished him yearly with a never-failing income, like government bonds, but at a much higher rate of interest. Even though the crimes this Godahl had committed were all on paper, nevertheless Godahl was a living being to his creator. More—he was Armiston, and Armiston was Godahl.

It was not surprising, then, that when Tuesday came Armiston awaited

the hour with feverish impatience. Here, as his strange friend had so thoughtlessly and casually told him, was an opportunity for the great Godahl to outdo even himself. Here was an opportunity for Godahl to be the greatest detective in the world, in the first place, before he could carry out one of his sensational thefts.

So it was Godahl, not Armiston, who helped his wife out of their automobile that evening and mounted the splendid steps of the Wentworth mansion. He cast his eye aloft; took in every inch of the façade.

"No," he said, "Godahl cannot break in from the street. I must have a look at the back of the house."

He cast his eyes on the ironwork that guarded the deep windows giving on the street.

It was not iron after all, but chilled steel sunk into armored concrete. The outposts of this house were as safely guarded as the vault of the United States Mint.

"It's got to be from the inside," he said, making mental note of this fact.

The butler was stone-deaf. This was rather singular. Why should a family of the standing of the Wentworths employ a man as head of their city establishment who was stone-deaf? Armiston looked at the man with curiosity. He was still in middle age. Surely, then, he was not retained because of years of service. No, there was something more than charity behind this. He addressed a casual word to the man as he handed him his hat and cane. His back was turned and the man did not reply. Armiston turned and repeated the sentence in the same tone. The man watched his lips in the bright light of the hall.

"A lip-reader, and a dandy," thought Armiston, for the butler seemed to catch every word he said.

"Fact Number 2!" said the creator of Godahl the thief.

He felt no compunction at thus noting the most intimate details of the Wentworth establishment. An accident had put him on the track of a rare good story, and it was all copy. Besides, he told himself, when he came to write the story he would disguise it in such a way that no one reading it would know it was about the Wentworths. If their establishment happened to possess the requisite setting for a great story, surely there was no reason why he should not take advantage of that fact.

The great thief—he made no bones of the fact to himself that he had come here to help Godahl—accepted the flattering greeting of his hostess with the grand air that so well fitted him. Armiston was tall and thin, with slender fingers and a touch of gray in his wavy hair, for all his youthful years, and he knew how to wear his clothes. Mrs. Wentworth was proud of him as a social ornament, even aside from his glittering fame as an author. And Mrs. Armiston was well born, so there was no jar in their being received in the best house of the town.

The dinner was truly delightful. Here Armiston saw, or thought he saw, one of the reasons for the deaf butler. The hostess had him so trained that she was able to catch her servant's eye and instruct him in this or that trifle by merely moving her lips. It was almost uncanny, thought the author, this silent conversation the deaf man and his mistress were able to carry on unnoticed by the others.

"By gad, it's wonderful! Godahl, my friend, underscore that note of yours referring to the deaf butler. Don't miss it. It will take a trick."

Armiston gave his undivided attention to his hostess as soon as he found Wentworth entertaining Mrs. Armiston and thus properly dividing the party. He persuaded her to talk by a cleverly pointed question here and there; and as she talked, he studied her.

"We are going to rob you of your precious white ruby, my friend," he thought humorously to himself; "and while we are laying our wires there is nothing about you too small to be worthy of our attention."

Did she really possess the white ruby? Did this man Benson know anything about the white ruby? And what was the meaning of the strange actions of his friend Johanssen when approached on the subject in this house? His hostess came to have a wonderful fascination for him. He pictured this beautiful creature so avid in her lust for rare gems that she actually did penetrate the establishment of some heathen potentate in the Straits simply for the purpose of stealing the mystic stone. "Have you ever, by any chance, been in the Straits?" he asked indifferently.

"Wait," Mrs. Wentworth said with a laugh as she touched his hand lightly; "I have some curios from the Straits, and I will venture to say you have never seen their like."

Half an hour later they were all seated over coffee and cigarettes in Mrs. Wentworth's boudoir. It was indeed a strange place. There was scarcely a single corner of the world that had not contributed something to its furnishing. Carvings of teak and ivory; hangings of sweet-scented vegetable fibers; lamps of jade; queer little gods, all sitting like Buddha with their legs drawn up under them, carved out of jade or sardonyx; scarfs of baroque pearls; Darjeeling turquoises—Armiston had never before seen such a collection. And each item had its story. He began to look on this frail little woman with different eyes. She had been and seen and done, and the tale of her life, what she had actually lived, outshone even that of the glittering rascal Godahl, who was standing beside him now and directing his ceaseless questions. "Have you any rubies?" he asked.

Mrs. Wentworth bent before a safe in the wall. With swift fingers she whirled the combination. The keen eyes of Armiston followed the bright knob like a cat.

"Fact Number 3!" said the Godahl in him as he mentally made note of the numbers. "Five—eight—seven—four—six. That's the combination."

Mrs. Wentworth showed him six pigeon-blood rubies.

"This one is pale," he said carelessly, holding a particularly large stone up to the light. "Is it true that occasionally they are found white?"

His hostess looked at him before answering. He was intent on a deep-red stone he held in the palm of his hand. It seemed a thousand miles deep.

"What a fantastic idea!" she said. She glanced at her husband, who had reached out and taken her hand in a naturally affectionate manner.

"Fact Number 4!" mentally noted Armiston. "Are not you in mortal fear of robbery with all this wealth?"

Mrs. Wentworth laughed lightly.

"That is why we live in a fortress," she said.

"Have you never, then, been visited by thieves?" asked the author boldly.

"Never!" she said.

"A lie," thought Armiston. "Fact Number 5! We are getting on swimmingly."

"I do not believe that even your Godahl the Infallible could get in here," Mrs. Wentworth said. "Not even the servants enter this room. That door is not locked with a key; yet it locks. I am not much of a housekeeper," she said lazily, "but such housekeeping as is done in this room is all done by these poor little hands of mine."

"No! Most amazing! May I look at the door?"

"Yes, Mr. Godahl," said this woman, who had lived more lives than Godahl himself.

Armiston examined the door, this strange device that locked without a key, apparently indeed without a lock, and came away disappointed.

"Well, Mr. Godahl?" his hostess said tauntingly. He shook his head in perplexity.

"Most ingenious," he said; and then suddenly: "Yet I will venture that if I turned Godahl loose on this problem he would solve it."

"What fun!" she cried, clapping her hands.

"You challenge him?" asked Armiston.

"What nonsense is this!" cried Wentworth, coming forward.

"No nonsense at all," said Mrs. Wentworth. "Mr. Armiston has just said that his Godahl could rob me. Let him try. If he can—if mortal man can gain the secret of ingress and egress of this room—I want to know it. I don't believe mortal man can enter this room."

Armiston noted a strange glitter in her eyes.

"Gad! She was born to the part! What a woman!" he thought. And then aloud:

"I will set him to work. I will lay the scene of his exploit in—say— Hungary, where this room might very well exist in some feudal castle. How many people have entered this room since it was made the storehouse of all this wealth?"

"Not six besides yourself," replied Mrs. Wentworth.

"Then no one can recognize it if I describe it in a story—in fact, I will change the material details. We will say that it is not jewels Godahl is seeking. We will say that it is a—"

Mrs. Wentworth's hand touched his own. The tips of her fingers were cold. "A white ruby," she said.

"Gad! What a thoroughbred!" he exclaimed to himself—or to Godahl. And then aloud: "Capital! I will send you a copy of the story autographed."

The next day he called at The Towers and sent up his card to Mr. Benson's apartments. Surely a man of Benson's standing could be trusted with such a secret. In fact it was evidently not a secret to Benson, who in all probability was one of the six Mrs. Wentworth said had entered that room. Armiston wanted to talk the matter over with Benson. He had given up his idea of having fun with him by sending him a marked copy of the magazine containing his tale. His story had taken complete possession of him, as always had been the case when he was at work dispatching Godahl on his adventures.

"If that ruby really exists," Armiston said, "I don't know whether I shall write the story or steal the ruby for myself. Benson is right. Godahl should not steal anymore for mere money. He is after rare, unique things now. And I am Godahl. I feel the same way myself."

A valet appeared, attired in a gorgeous livery. Armiston wondered why any self-respecting American would consent to don such raiment, even though it was the livery of the great Benson family.

"Mr. Armiston, sir," said the valet, looking at the author's card he held in his hand. "Mr. Benson sailed for Europe yesterday morning. He is spending the summer in Norway. I am to follow on the next steamer. Is there any message I can take to him, sir? I have heard him speak of you, sir."

Armiston took the card and wrote on it in pencil:

I called to apologize. I am Martin Brown. The chance was too good to miss. You will pardon me, won't you?

For the next two weeks Armiston gave himself over to his dissipation, which was accompanying Godahl on this adventure. It was a formidable task. The secret room he placed in a Hungarian castle, as he had promised. A beautiful countess was his heroine. She had seen the world, mostly in man's attire, and her escapades had furnished vivacious reading for two continents. No one could possibly connect her with Mrs. Billy Wentworth. So far it was easy. But how was Godahl to get into this wonderful room where the countess had hidden this wonderful rare white ruby? The room was lined with chilled steel. Even the door—this he had noted when he was examining that peculiar portal—was lined with layers of steel. It could withstand any known tool.

However, Armiston was Armiston, and Godahl was Godahl. He got into that room. He got the white ruby!

The manuscript went to the printers, and the publishers said that Armiston had never done anything like it since he started Godahl on his astonishing career.

He banked the check for his tale, and as he did so he said: "Gad! I would a hundred times rather possess that white ruby. Confound the thing! I feel as if I had not heard the last of it."

Armiston and his wife went to Maine for the summer without leaving their address. Along in the early fall he received by registered mail, forwarded by his trusted servant at the town house, a package containing the envelope he had addressed to J. Borden Benson, The Towers. Furthermore it contained the dollar bills he had dispatched to that individual, together with his note which he had signed "Martin Brown." And across the note, in the most insulting manner, was written in coarse, greasy blue-pencil lines:

Damnably impertinence. I'll cane you the first time I see you.

And no more. That was enough of course—quite sufficient.

In the same mail came a note from Armiston's publishers, saying that his story, "The White Ruby," was scheduled for publication in the October number, out September 25th. This cheered him up. He was anxious to see it in print. Late in September they started back to town.

"Aha!" he said as he sat reading his paper in the parlor car. He had caught this train by the veriest tip of its tail and upset the running schedule in the act. "Aha! I see my genial friend, J. Borden Benson, is in town, contrary to custom at this time of year. Life must be a great bore to that snob."

A few days after arriving in town he received a package of advance copies of the magazine containing his story, and he read the tale of "The White Ruby" as if he had never seen it before. On the cover of one copy, which he was to dispatch to his grumpy benefactor, J. Borden Benson, he wrote:

Charmed to be caned. Call any time. See contents.

Oliver Armiston

On another he wrote:

Dear Mrs. Wentworth: See how simple it is to pierce your fancied security!

He dispatched these two magazines with a feeling of glee. No sooner had he done so, however, than he learned that the Wentworths had not yet returned from Newport. The magazine would be forwarded to them no doubt. The Wentworths' absence made the tale all the better, in fact, for in his story Armiston had insisted on Godahl's breaking into the castle and

solving the mystery of the keyless door during the season when the château was closed and strung with a perfect network of burglar alarms connecting with the *gendarmérie* in the near-by village.

That was the twenty-fifth day of September. The magazine was put on sale that morning.

On the twenty-sixth day of September Armiston bought a late edition of an afternoon paper from a leather-lunged boy who was hawking "Extra!" in the street. Across the first page the headlines met his eye:

ROBBERY AND MURDER IN THE WENTWORTH MANSION!

Private watchmen, summoned by burglar alarm at ten o'clock this morning, find servant with skull crushed on floor of mysterious steel-doored room. Murdered man's pockets filled with rare jewels. Police believe he was murdered by a confederate who escaped.

THE WENTWORTH BUTLER, STONE-DEAF, HAD JUST RETURNED FROM NEWPORT TO OPEN HOUSE AT TIME OF MURDER

It was ten o'clock that night when an automobile drew up at Armiston's door, and a tall man with a square jaw, square shoes and a square mustache alighted. This was Deputy Police Commissioner Byrnes, a professional detective whom the new administration had drafted into the city's service from the government secret service.

Byrnes was admitted and as he advanced to the middle of the drawing room, without so much as a nod to the ghostlike Armiston who stood shivering before him, he drew a package of papers from his pocket.

"I presume you have seen all the evening papers," he said, spitting his words through his half-closed teeth with so much show of personal malice that Armiston—never a brave man in spite of his Godahl—cowered before him.

Armiston shook his head dumbly at first, but at length he managed to say: "Not all; no."

The Deputy Commissioner with much deliberation drew out the latest extra and handed it to Armiston without a word.

It was the "Evening News." The first page was divided down its entire length by a black line. On one side, and occupying four columns, was a word-for-word reprint of Armiston's story, "The White Ruby."

On the other, the facts in deadly parallel, was a graphic account of the robbery and murder at the home of Billy Wentworth. The parallel was glaring in the intensity of its dumb accusation. On the one side was the theoretical Godahl, working his masterly way of crime, step by step; and on the other was the plagiarism of Armiston's story, following the intricacies of the mastermind with copybook accuracy.

The editor, who must have been a genius in his way, did not accuse. He simply placed the fiction and the fact side by side and let the reader judge for himself. It was masterly. If, as the law says, the mind that conceives, the intelligence that directs, a crime is more guilty than the very hand that acts, then Armiston here was both thief and murderer. Thief, because the white ruby had actually been stolen. Mrs. Billy Wentworth, rushed to the city by special train, attended by doctors and nurses, now confirmed the story of the theft of the ruby. Murderer, because in the story Godahl had for once in his career stooped to murder as the means, and had triumphed over the dead body of his confederate, scorning, in his joy at possessing the white ruby, the paltry diamonds, pearls and red rubies with which his confederate had crammed his pockets.

Armiston seized the police official by his lapels.

"The butler!" he screamed. "The butler! Yes, the butler. Quick, or he will have flown."

Byrnes gently disengaged the hands that had grasped him.

"Too late," he said. "He has already flown. Sit down and quiet your nerves. We need your help. You are the only man in the world who can help us now."

When Armiston was himself again he told the whole tale, beginning with his strange meeting with J. Borden Benson on the train, and ending with his accepting Mrs. Wentworth's challenge to have Godahl break into the room and steal the white ruby. Byrnes nodded over the last part. He had already heard that from Mrs. Wentworth, and there was the autographed copy of the magazine to show for it.

"You say that J. Borden Benson told you of this white ruby in the first place."

Armiston again told, in great detail, the circumstances, all the humor now turned into grim tragedy.

"That is strange," said the ex-secret-service chief. "Did you leave your purse at home or was your pocket picked?"

"I thought at first that I had absentmindedly left it at home. Then I remembered having paid the chauffeur out of the roll of bills, so my pocket must have been picked."

"What kind of a looking man was this Benson?"

"You must know him," said Armiston.

"Yes, I know him; but I want to know what he looked like to you. I want to find out how he happened to be so handy when you were in need of money."

Armiston described the man minutely.

The Deputy sprang to his feet. "Come with me," he said; and they hurried into the automobile and soon drew up in front of The Towers.

Five minutes later they were ushered into the magnificent apartment of J. Borden Benson. That worthy was in his bath preparing to retire for the

night.

"I don't catch the name," Armiston and the Deputy heard him cry through the bathroom door to his valet.

"Mr. Oliver Armiston, sir."

"Ah, he has come for his caning, I expect. I'll be there directly."

He did not wait to complete his toilet, so eager was he to see the author. He strode out in a brilliant bathrobe and in one hand he carried an alpenstock. His eyes glowed in anger. But the sight of Byrnes surprised as well as halted him.

"Do you mean to say this is J. Borden Benson?" cried Armiston to Byrnes, rising to his feet and pointing at the man.

"The same," said the Deputy; "I swear to it. I know him well! I take it he is not the gentleman who paid your carfare to New Haven."

"Not by a hundred pounds!" exclaimed Armiston as he surveyed the huge bulk of the elephantine clubman.

The forced realization that the stranger he had hitherto regarded as a benefactor was not J. Borden Benson at all, but someone who had merely assumed that worthy's name while he was playing the conceited author as an easy dupe, did more to quiet Armiston's nerves than all the sedatives his doctor had given him. It was a badly dashed popular author who sat down with the Deputy Commissioner in his library an hour later. He would gladly have consigned Godahl to the bottom of the sea; but it was too late. Godahl had taken the trick.

"How do you figure it?" Armiston asked, turning to the Deputy.

"The beginning is simple enough. It is the end that bothers me," said the official. "Your bogus J. Borden Benson is, of course, the brains of the whole combination. Your infernal Godahl has told us just exactly how this crime was committed. Now your infernal Godahl must bring the guilty parties to justice."

It was plain to be seen that the police official hated Godahl worse than poison, and feared him too.

"Why not look in the Rogues' Gallery for this man who befriended me on the train?"

The chief laughed.

"For the love of Heaven, Armiston, do you, who pretend to know all about scientific thievery, think for a moment that the man who took your measure so easily is of the class of crooks who get their pictures in the Rogues' Gallery? Talk sense!"

"I can't believe you when you say he picked my pocket."

"I don't care whether you believe me or not; he did, or one of his pals did. It all amounts to the same thing, don't you see? First, he wanted to get acquainted with you. Now the best way to get into your good graces was to put you unsuspectingly under obligation to him. So he robs you of your

money. From what I have seen of you in the last few hours it must have been like taking candy from a child. Then he gets next to you in line. He pretends that you are merely some troublesome toad in his path. He gives you money for your ticket, to get you out of his way so he won't miss his train. His train! Of course his train is your train. He puts you in a position where you have to make advances to him. And then, grinning to himself all the time at your conceit and gullibility, he plays you through your pride, your Godahl. Think of the creator of the great Godahl falling for a trick like that!"

Byrnes's last words were the acme of biting sarcasm.

"You admit yourself that he is too clever for you to put your hands on."

"And then," went on Byrnes, not heeding the interruption, "he invites you to lunch and tells you what he wants you to do for him. And you follow his lead like a sheep at the tail of the bellwether! Great Scott, Armiston! I would give a year's salary for one hour's conversation with that man."

Armiston was beginning to see the part this queer character had played; but he was in a semihysterical state, and, like a woman in such a position, he wanted a calm mind to tell him the whole thing in words of one syllable, to verify his own dread.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I don't quite follow. You say he tells me what he wants me to do."

Byrnes shrugged his shoulders in disgust; then, as if resigned to the task before him, he began his explanation:

"Here, man, I will draw a diagram for you. This gentleman friend of yours—we will call him John Smith for convenience—wants to get possession of this white ruby. He knows that it is in the keeping of Mrs. Billy Wentworth. He knows you know Mrs. Wentworth and have access to her house. He knows that she stole this bauble and is frightened to death all the time. Now John Smith is a pretty clever chap. He handled the great Armiston like hot putty. He had exhausted his resources. He is baffled and needs help. What does he do? He reads the stories about the great Godahl. Confidentially, Mr. Armiston, I will tell you that I think your great Godahl is mush. But that is neither here nor there. If you can sell him as a gold brick, all right. But Mr. John Smith is struck by the wonderful ingenuity of this Godahl. He says: 'Ha! I will get Godahl to tell me how to get this gem!'

"So he gets hold of yourself, sir, and persuades you that you are playing a joke on him by getting him to rant and rave about the great Godahl. Then—and here the villain enters—he says: 'Here is a thing the great Godahl cannot do. I dare him to do it.' He tells you about the gem, whose very existence is quite fantastic enough to excite the imagination of the wonderful Armiston. And by clever suggestion he persuades you to lay the plot at the home of Mrs. Wentworth. And all the time you are chuckling to yourself, thinking what a rare joke you are going to have on J. Borden Benson when you send him an autographed copy and show him that he was talking to the

distinguished genius all the time and didn't know it. That's the whole story, sir. Now wake up!"

Byrnes sat back in his chair and regarded Armiston with the smile a pedagogue bestows on a refractory boy whom he has just flogged soundly.

"I will explain further," he continued. "You haven't visited the house yet. You can't. Mrs. Wentworth, for all she is in bed with four dozen hot-water bottles, would tear you limb from limb if you went there. And don't you think for a minute she isn't able to. That woman is a vixen."

Armiston nodded gloomily. The very thought of her now sent him into a cold sweat.

"Mr. Godahl, the obliging," continued the Deputy, "notes one thing to begin with: The house cannot be entered from the outside. So it must be an inside job. How can this be accomplished? Well, there is the deaf butler. Why is he deaf? Godahl ponders. Ha! He has it! The Wentworths are so dependent on servants that they must have them round at all times. This butler is the one who is constantly about them. They are worried to death by their possession of this white ruby. Their house has been raided from the inside a dozen times. Nothing is taken, mind you. They suspect their servants. This thing haunts them, but the woman will not give up this foolish bauble. So she has as her major domo a man who cannot understand a word in any language unless he is looking at the speaker and is in a bright light. He can only understand the lips. Handy, isn't it? In a dull light or with their backs turned they can talk about anything they want to. This is a jewel of a butler.

"But," added Byrnes, "one day a man calls. He is a lawyer. He tells the butler he is heir to a fortune—fifty thousand dollars. He must go to Ireland to claim it. Your friend on the train—he is the man of course— sends your butler to Ireland. So this precious butler is lost. They must have another. Only a deaf one will do. And they find just the man they want—quite accidentally, you understand. Of course it is Godahl, with forged letters saying he has been in service in great houses. Presto! The great Godahl himself is now the butler. It is simple enough to play deaf. You say this is fiction. Let me tell you this: Six weeks ago the Wentworths actually changed butlers. That hasn't come out in the papers yet."

Armiston, who had listened to the Deputy's review of his story listlessly, now sat up with a start. He suddenly exclaimed gleefully:

"But my story didn't come out till two days ago!"

"Ah, yes; but you forget that it has been in the hands of your publishers for three months. A man who was clever enough to dupe the great Armiston wouldn't shirk the task of getting hold of a proof of that story."

Armiston sank deeper into his chair.

"Once Godahl got inside the house the rest was simple. He corrupted one of the servants. He opened the steel-lined door with the flame of an

oxyacetylene blast. As you say in your story that flame cuts steel like wax; he didn't have to bother about the lock. He simply cut the door down. Then he put his confederate in good humor by telling him to fill his pockets with the diamonds and other junk in the safe, which he obligingly opens. One thing bothers me, Armiston. How did you find out about that infernal contraption that killed the confederate?"

Armiston buried his face in his hands. Byrnes rudely shook him.

"Come," he said; "you murdered that man, though you are innocent. Tell me how."

"Is this the third degree?" said Armiston.

"It looks like it," said the Deputy grimly as he gnawed at his stubby mustache. Armiston drew a long breath, like one who realizes how hopeless is his situation. He began to speak in a low tone. All the while the Deputy glared at Godahl's inventor with his accusing eye.

"When I was sitting in the treasure room with the Wentworths and my wife, playing auction bridge, I dismissed the puzzle of the door as easily solved by means of the brazing flame. The problem was not to get into the house, or into this room, but to find the ruby. It was not in the safe."

"No, of course not. I suppose your friend on the train was kind enough to tell you that. He had probably looked there himself."

"Gad! He did tell me that, come to think of it. Well, I studied that room. I was sure the white ruby, if it really existed, was within ten feet of me. I examined the floor, the ceiling, the walls. No result. But," he said, shivering as if in a draft of cold air, "there was a chest in that room made of Lombardy oak." The harassed author buried his face in his hands. "Oh, this is terrible!" he moaned.

"Go on," said the Deputy in his colorless voice.

"I can't. I tell it all in the story, Heaven help me!"

"I know you tell it all in the story," came the rasping voice of Byrnes; "but I want you to tell it to me. I want to hear it from your own lips—as Armiston, you understand, whose deviltry has just killed a man; not as your damnable Godahl."

"The chest was not solid oak," went on Armiston. "It was solid steel covered with oak to disguise it."

"How did you know that?"

"I had seen it before."

"Where?"

"In Italy fifteen years ago, in a decayed castle, back through the Soldini Pass from Lugano. It was the possession of an old nobleman, a friend of a friend of mine."

"Humph!" grunted the Deputy. And then: "Well, how did you know it was the same one?"

"By the inscription carved on the front. It was—but I have told all this in

print already. Why need I go over it all again?"

"I want to hear it again from your own lips. Maybe there are some points you did not tell in print. Go on!"

"The inscription was ` *Sanctus Dominus.* '"

The Deputy smiled grimly.

"Very fitting, I should say. Praise the Lord with the most diabolical engine of destruction I have ever seen."

"And then," said Armiston, "there was the owner's name—'Arno Petronii.' Queer name that."

"Yes," said the Deputy dryly. "How did you hit on this as the receptacle for the white ruby?"

"If it were the same one I saw in Lugano—and I felt sure it was—it was certain death to attempt to open it—that is, for one who did not know how. Such machines were common enough in the Middle Ages. There was an obvious way to open it. It was meant to be obvious. To open it that way was inevitable death. It released tremendous springs that crushed anything within a radius of five feet. You saw that?"

"I did," said the Deputy, and he shuddered as he spoke. Then, bringing his fierce face within an inch of the cowering Armiston, he said:

"You knew the secret spring by which that safe could be opened as simply as a shoebox, eh?"

Armiston nodded his head.

"But Godahl did not," he said. "Having recognized this terrible chest," went on the author, "I guessed it must be the hiding place of the jewel—for two reasons: In the first place Mrs. Wentworth had avoided showing it to us. She passed it by as a mere bit of curious furniture. Second, it was too big to go through the door or any one of the windows. They must have gone to the trouble of taking down the wall to get that thing in there. Something of a task, too, considering it weighs about two tons."

"You didn't bring out that point in your story."

"Didn't I? I fully intended to."

"Maybe," said the Deputy, watching his man sharply, "it so impressed your friend who paid your carfare to New Haven that he clipped it out of the manuscript when he borrowed it."

"There is no humor in this affair, sir, if you will pardon me," said Armiston.

"That is quite true. Go ahead."

"The rest you know. Godahl, in my story—the thief in real life—had to sacrifice a life to open that chest. So he corrupted a small kitchen servant, filling his pockets with these other jewels, and told him to touch the spring."

"You murdered that man in cold blood," said the Deputy, rising and pacing the floor. "The poor deluded devil, from the looks of what's left of him, never let out a whimper, never knew what hit him. Here, take some more of this brandy. Your nerves are in a bad way."

"What I can't make out is this," said Armiston after a time. "There was a million dollars' worth of stuff in that room that could have been put into a quart measure. Why did not this thief, who was willing to go to all the trouble to get the white ruby, take some of the jewels? Nothing is missing besides the white ruby, as I understand it. Is there?"

"No," said the Deputy. "Not a thing. Here comes a messenger boy."

"For Mr. Armiston? Yes," he said to the entering maid. The boy handed him a package for which the Deputy signed.

"This is for you," he said, turning to Armiston as he closed the door. "Open it."

When the package was opened the first object to greet their eyes was a roll of bills.

"This grows interesting," said Byrnes. He counted the money. "Thirtynine dollars. Your friend evidently is returning the money he stole from you at the station. What does he have to say for himself? I see there is a note."

He reached over and took the paper out of Armiston's hands. It was ordinary bond stationery, with no identifying marks of any consequence. The note was written in bronze ink, in a careful copperplate hand, very small and precise. It read:

Most Excellency Sir:

Herewith, most honored dollars I am dispatching complete. Regretful extremely of sad blood being not to be prevented. Accept trifle from true friend.

That was all.

"There's a jeweler's box," said Byrnes. "Open it."

Inside the box was a lozenge-shaped diamond about the size of a little fingernail. It hung from a tiny bar of silver, highly polished and devoid of ornament. On the back under the clasp-pin were several microscopic characters.

There were several obvious clues to be followed—the messenger boy, the lawyers who induced the deaf butler to go to Ireland on what later proved to be a wild-goose chase, the employment agency through which the new butler had been secured, and so on. But all of these avenues proved too respectable to yield results. Deputy Byrnes had early arrived at his own conclusions, by virtue of the knowledge he had gained as government agent, yet to appease the popular indignation he kept up a desultory search for the criminal.

It was natural that Armiston should think of his friend Johanssen at this juncture. Johanssen possessed that wonderful Oriental capacity of aloofness which we Westerners are so ready to term indifference or lack of curiosity.

"No, I thank you," said Johanssen. "I'd rather not mix in."

The pleadings of the author were in vain. His words fell on deaf ears.

"If you will not lift a hand because of your friendship for me," said Armiston bitterly, "then think of the law. Surely there is something due justice, when both robbery and bloody murder have been committed!"

"Justice!" cried Johanssen in scorn. "Justice, you say! My friend, if you steal from me, and I reclaim by force that which is mine, is that injustice? If you cannot see the idea behind that, surely, then, I cannot explain it to you."

"Answer one question," said Armiston. "Have you any idea who the man was I met on the train?"

"For your own peace of mind—yes. As a clue leading to what you so glibly term justice—pshaw! Tonight's sundown would be easier for you to catch than this man if I know him. Mind you, Armiston, I do not know. But I believe. Here is what I believe:

"In a dozen courts of kings and petty princelings that I know of in the East there are Westerners retained as advisers—fiscal agents they usually call them. Usually they are American or English, or occasionally German.

"Now I ask you a question. Say that you were in the hire of a heathen prince, and a grievous wrong were done that prince, say, by a thoughtless woman who had not the least conception of the beauty of an idea she had outraged. Merely for the possession of a bauble, valueless to her except to appease vanity, she ruthlessly rode down a superstition that was as holy to this prince as your own belief in Christ is to you. What would you do?"

Without waiting for Armiston to answer, Johanssen went on:

"I know a man—You say this man you met on the train had wonderful hands, did he not? Yes, I thought so. Armiston, I know a man who would not sit idly by and smile to himself over the ridiculous fuss occasioned by the loss of an imperfect stone—off color, badly cut, and everything else. Neither would he laugh at the superstition behind it. He would say to himself: 'This superstition is older by several thousand years than I or my people.' And this man, whom I know, is brave enough to right that wrong himself if his underlings failed."

"I follow," said Armiston dully.

"But," said Johanssen, leaning forward and tapping the author on the knee—"but the task proves too big for him. What did he do? He asked the cleverest man in the world to help him. And Godahl helped him. That," said Johanssen, interrupting Armiston with a raised finger, "is the story of the white ruby. The Story of the White Ruby, you see, is something infinitely finer than mere vulgar robbery and murder, as the author of Godahl the Infallible conceived it."

Johanssen said a great deal more. In the end he took the lozenge-shaped diamond pendant and put the glass on the silver bar, that his friend might see the inscription on the back. He told him what the inscription signified

—"Brother of a King," and, furthermore, how few men alive possessed the capacity for brotherhood.

"I think," said Armiston as he was about to take his leave, "that I will travel in the Straits this winter."

"If you do," said Johanssen, "I earnestly advise you to leave your Godahl and his decoration at home."

First published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, February 15, 1913.

The Lineup

107 words

BRIAN COX writes under the names B. Newton and Ben Town. His last tale in AHMM was "For Dot" (May 2014).

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN's newest novel is *Shoot* (Forge, February 2016).

JOSEPH GOODRICH's second Nero Wolfe novel adaptation for the stage, *Might as Well Be Dead*, will premiere in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2017.

Booked & Printed columnist **ROBERT C. HAHN** is the former book editor for the *Cincinnati Post*.

EVE FISHER blogs at SleuthSayers.org. Her work appears in *Startling Sci-Fi*, *Plan-B Magazine*, and *King's River Life*.

WENDY LEEDS is the author of *The Child Sellers* and *Cameo* (Tower/Leisure, 1981-2.).

Freelance editor and reviewer **RUSSEL D. MCLEAN's** *And When I Die* will be released in the UK this September.

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG is a writer and lecturer. A second story in the Louisa series is forthcoming in AHMM.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by **Willie Rose** | 29 words

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

TF T XTMPD, U ETZ AZXP FTP GSTG U STLO
EAFUFGOZGXP DOKIFOJ GA JOKOZJ T
HXTEWYTUXOD AD GA BDAFOEIGO TZP BAAD
JOLUX MSA JAOF TMTP MUGS SUF GADYOZGOD.
—JADAGSP X. FTPODF

CIPHER: _____
ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 107

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
thejokrsuvwxyzabcdefghijklmnopq

From "The Unprincipled Affair of the Practical Joker"
in *A Treasury of Sayers Stories*.

—Dorothy L. Sayers

As a lawyer, I can only say that I have consistently refused to defend a blackmailer or to prosecute any poor devil who does away with his tormenter.

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

This Could Work

102 words



Joachim Wendler/Shutterstock.com

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 44 Wall Street, Suite 904, New York, NY 10005. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If you would like your story returned, please include an SASE.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 109.

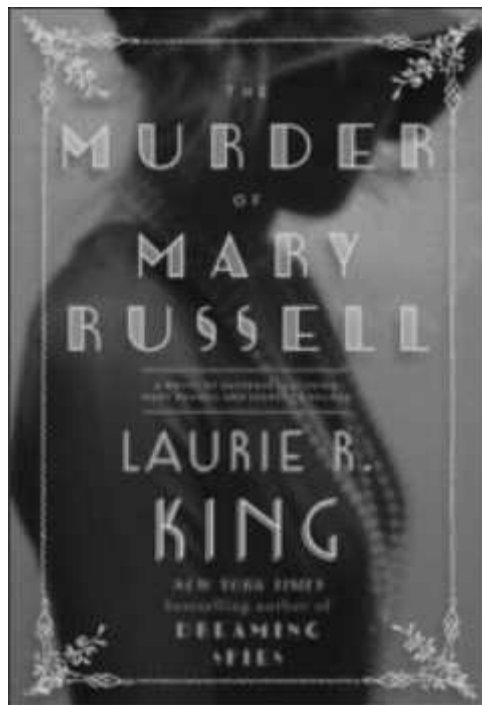
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN | 1070 words

Authors create their heroes, but that doesn't always mean that they control their fate. Arthur Conan Doyle famously tried to kill Sherlock Holmes, only to reverse course and reanimate his hero due to popular demand. Ed McBain tried to kill Steve Carella in *Cop Hater*, the very first in his 87th Precinct series, but his editors complained that he was too important a character to kill off. McBain relented and Carella continued to appear as a central character for decades more. Margaret Maron has decided that her popular hero, Judge Deborah Knott, will no longer be featured in her mysteries. Deborah Knott retired at the top of her game, and Maron seems adamant that her decision is final.

Now Laurie R. King, who has reinvigorated the Holmes canon with fourteen Mary Russell novels beginning with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* in 1994, threatens to end her series with **THE MURDER OF MARY RUSSELL** (Bantam, \$28).

King is a marvelous storyteller and while Mary Russell is the main character created for this series, King has also added considerably to the life and adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Now she tackles in brilliant fashion the backstory of Clara Hudson. Hudson was, of course, a constant presence in the Baker Street residence of Holmes and Watson in Doyle's stories, but her role was minor if not menial.



For those unfamiliar with Laurie King's series, Holmes and Russell now occupy a home in Sussex with Mrs. Hudson still, at age 69, providing housekeeping services for the couple. Russell is the only one home when a man calling himself Samuel Hudson shows up and takes Mary by surprise with a gun. Then Mrs. Hudson returns home to an empty house in disarray and "a terrible amount of blood" on the floor.

Russell's fate remains unknown as King launches into the enthralling story of Clara's—Clarissa's—parentage and childhood. It's a story that begins with the romance of Sally Rickets and James Hudson, a sailor and con man. Hudson falls under the sway of a criminal kingpin called the Bishop, only to flee from him by shipping out on the barque *Gloria Scott*.

The family is eventually reunited in Australia, but when Sally dies in childbirth, ten-year-old Clarissa and younger sister Alicia are left in the care of their sporadically employed father, who soon discovers that Clarissa is a perfect foil for his criminal activities.

Clarissa was an apt pupil in learning the "cheats"—the various con games her father employed—and on returning to London, her relationship with the Bishop and her clever rise beyond those petty games leads eventually to a meeting with Sherlock Holmes under less than auspicious circumstances.

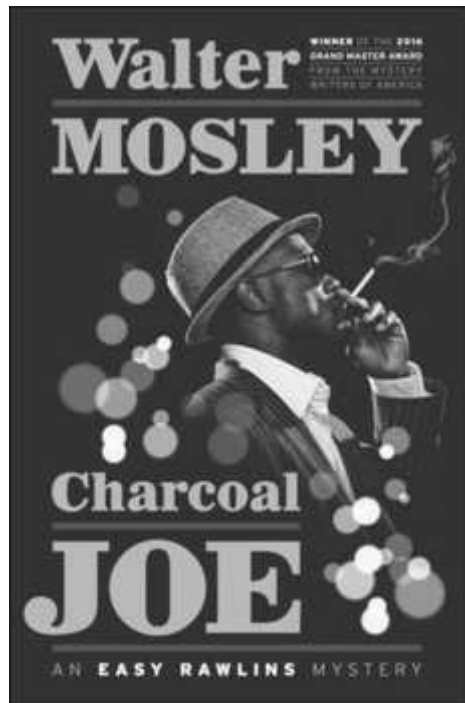
It is up to Sherlock to read the signs left in the house by the confrontation between Mary Russell and Samuel Hudson that will reveal

Russell's fate. Chalk up another excellent mystery from Laurie R. King that builds both Russell's legend and expands the story of Doyle's characters.

Walter Mosley told me in an interview published in *Publishers Weekly* that his best-known hero Easy Rawlins was unlikely to survive a car crash in 2007's *Blonde Faith*. But Easy did survive (thankfully), and after a six-year hiatus, he reappeared in 2013's *Little Green*, followed by *Rose Gold*.

Easy's adventures continue in **CHARCOAL JOE** (Doubleday, \$26.95) as the sleuth and favortrader reaches the momentous year 1968 when the country is roiled by the Vietnam War, assassinations, and civil unrest.

Virtually all of the many memorable characters—and it's a large group—from this series return in *Charcoal Joe* in roles ranging from cameo appearances to major support. Deadly Ray "Mouse" Alexander gets Easy involved with Charcoal Joe, a k a Rufus Tyler, a man so lethal a friend tells Easy that "Joe was Mouse before there was a Mouse."



Tyler is old and in prison now. He wants to hire Easy to prove that the son of a friend, Dr. Seymour Brathwaite, a physicist doing postgraduate work at UCLA, is not a killer, despite being found at the scene of a double murder.

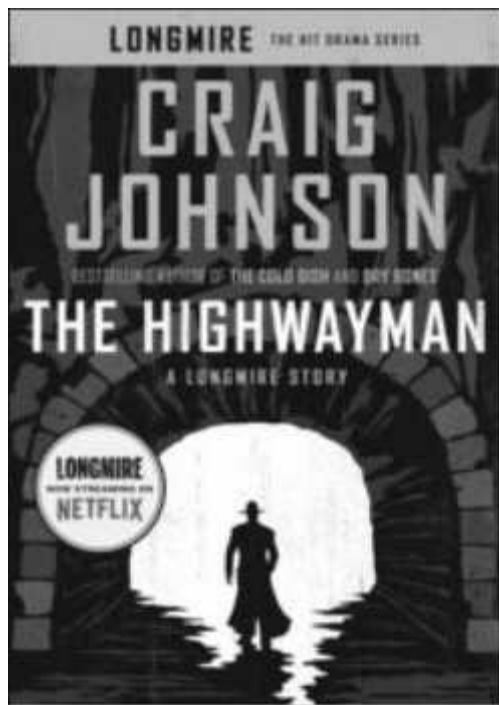
Neither Tyler nor Seymour will tell Easy everything they know; even

Seymour's foster mother Jasmine is tight lipped. When three men break into Easy's house while no one is home, Easy is sure the break-in is connected to Seymour's problem. So Easy calls on a variety of friends and allies for help, including Fearless Jones, who provides needed muscle when things get tough; bail bondsman Milo Sweet; and the wondrous and fearsome Mama Jo, who's brought a little bayou magic to Los Angeles. Cop Melvin Suggs provides the information that one of the dead men was into money laundering and that a fortune disappeared when he was killed. So, if Easy wants to help Seymour he needs to find the money.

As always the ever-present stain of racism colors the pages as Easy straddles two conflicting worlds, as he struggles to find a way to save Seymour without sacrificing his principles or his life. But no one negotiates these two worlds better than Easy as he deals with cops and thugs; beautiful, dangerous women and brutal, dangerous men.

One mystery writer and his hero who are riding high in every respect are Craig Johnson and Sheriff Walt Longmire. The Wyoming sheriff has starred in eleven novels since he debuted in 1994's *The Cold Dish*, including a critically acclaimed television series that began on A&E and now appears on Netflix.

Longmire's most recent outing, **THE HIGHWAYMAN** (Viking, \$20), is a ghost story and a good one. The highway through Wind River Canyon in Wyoming passes through three living-rock tunnels and was the scene of a shootout between Bobby Womack, the first Arapaho trooper in the state, and two thieves who had stolen more than a thousand rare coins—the 1888-O Morgan silver dollars. Womack shot and killed both men, but the coins were never recovered and suspicion fell on Womack despite his sterling reputation.



Womack died a mere six months later in a suicidal attempt to stop a runaway fuel tanker.

Now, thirty-five years later, Trooper Rosey Wayman is responsible for that same stretch of road, and she is hearing a strange post-midnight radio transmission: "Unit 3, 10-78, officer needs assistance." The voice is that of Bobby Womack. Wayman has also found two of the rare coins, and both were associated with an unusual incident.

Longmire and his friend Henry Standing Bear volunteer to help and join Wayman on patrol. Longmire also contacts retired trooper Mike Harlow, who succeeded Womack, to hear his stories.

It's an absorbing story that brings to life both Wyoming's unique geology and its unique inhabitants, as Longmire searches for an answer to the mysterious transmissions and reappearance of the silver dollars.

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER | 78 words



Using the definitions below, fill in as many words as you can in the WORDS column. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram denotes the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the WORDS column, reading down, will spell out the author and the work quoted.

The solution to the puzzle will appear in the October issue.

DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A. Far from inconsequential	62 54 204 59 10 35 134 49 109
B. Bohemian sorts	194 161 172 76 138 207 120
C. Vacation activity	57 28 53 48 182 144 91 133
D. Crude shelters	111 36 75 124 160 147
E. Best bet	129 11 77 168 52 90 113 41 149 192
F. Former Balkans resident	199 142 26 82 58 186 159 167
G. Ezra follower	132 14 106 157 34 25 31 2
H. Verse creations	73 5 151 23 69 81 17
I. Hardly soothe	139 84 70 60 138 104 156
J. Thickening starch	98 55 168 178 203 146 162 178 3
K. — monkey, Himalayan critter	74 150 37 208 137 51 122 112
L. Winnow, in a fashion	187 96 38 130 19 183 86
M. — razor, problem- solving principle	191 115 196 95 42 127
N. One-time steel center	193 72 152 65 99 164 116 121 7
O. Inure	66 148 160 16 44 4 140 89
P. Consumes	162 143 27 176 126 169 200
Q. Confines	154 45 174 170 181 6 30

THE STORY THAT WON

DOUGLAS EMPRINGHAM | 300 words

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Douglas Empringham of San Bruno, California. Honorable mentions go to Chester Ryske of Frankfort, Illinois; Gina Kingsland of Lyndhurst, New Jersey; Rita A. Popp of Las Cruces, New Mexico; Patrick Gray of Sarasota, Florida; Richard Moriarty of Storrs, Connecticut; Larry Megazzi of Fishers, Indiana; Diana Charles of Santa Monica, California; Chet Rich of Marathon, Florida; and D. James Gross of Columbia, Kentucky.



Space Chimp / Shutterstock.com

AWAITING THE BATTERING RAM

When they reached the derelict warehouse, Pent tugged on the rusty iron ring. When that didn't work, Easy suggested turning it. That worked, the

lock gave with a grinding noise, and when pushed the door followed suit with creaking and scraping. Easy, meantime, swept away their footprints with a weed.

They entered the dank fusty building warily. And stopped when they saw windows either painted over or covered with cardboard.

"Doesn't smell like a crack or meth lab..." Easy said.

"I'm more worried 'bout cordite an' black powder."

Both resented how dope cookers and wacko bomb concocters were making life more stressful for workaday burglars.

"Dogs! I hear dogs!" Then Pent swore. "I ask you, who tracks with hounds over a B and E?"

Easy inched the door open. "Can't see them yet..."

"Yet!" Pent groaned. A second later he rapped: "How about something from your trickster cons and gags?"

"I'm working on it."

"I don't like being cornered!" Without another word Pent jerked open the door and took to his heels.

Easy closed the door and retreated through the dust to a deep shadow.

The hounds picked up Pent's new trail and followed. The man in charge left a single deputy to check inside the decrepit warehouse. Easy was waiting with his phone. When the door was tried, he started the recording of a woman sobbing and moaning.

That was enough to send the lone deputy running after the others.

Solution to the July/August "Dying Words"

46 words

WORD LIST

A. Despot	I. Ideals	R. Cloverleaf
B. Afterglow	J. Nuthatch	S. Kathy Bates
C. Vitamin	K. Huffish	T. System
D. Emmenthal	L. Ivory Coast	U. Whetstone
E. Kitchen	M. Tirade	V. Orestes
F. Evolution	N. Conjoin	W. Romantic
G. Hearty	O. Hurricane	X. Letters
H. Resolute	P. Cuisine	Y. Devour
	Q. Off-season	

QUOTATION

Author — DAVE KEHR

Work — IN HITCHCOCK'S WORLD (The *New York Times*—February 12, 2012)

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